

Mrs George de Horne Vaizey

"The Love Affairs of Pixie"

Chapter One.

The Question of Noses.

When Pixie O'Shaughnessy had reached her twentieth birthday it was borne in upon her with the nature of a shock that she was not beautiful. Hitherto a buoyant and innocent self-satisfaction, coupled with the atmosphere of love and admiration by which she was surrounded in the family circle, had succeeded in blinding her eyes to the very obvious defects of feature which the mirror portrayed. But suddenly, sharply, her eyes were opened.

"Did it ever occur to you, Bridgie, my dear, that I've grown-up *plain*?" she demanded of her sister, Mrs Victor, as the two sat by the fire one winter afternoon, partaking luxuriously of strong tea and potato cakes, and at the sound of such a surprising question Mrs Victor started as if a crack of thunder had suddenly pealed through the quiet room. She stared in amazement; her big, grey eyes widened dramatically.

"My good child," she demanded sternly, "whatever made you think of asking such a preposterous question?"

"'Twas borne in on me!" sighed Pixie sadly. "It's the way with life; ye go jog-trotting along, blind and cheerful, until suddenly ye bang your head against a wall, and your eyes are opened! 'Twas the same with me. I looked at myself every day, but I never saw. Habit, my dear, blindfolded me like a bandage, and looking at good-looking people all day long it seemed only natural that I should look nice too. But this morning the sun shone, and I stood before the glass twisting about to try on my new hat, and, Bridgie, the truth was revealed! *My nose!*"

"What's the matter with your nose?" demanded Mrs Victor. Her own sweet, delicately cut face was flushed with anger, and she sat with stiffened back staring across the fireplace as if demanding compensation for a personal injury.

Pixie sighed, and helped herself to another slice of potato cake.

"It scoops!" she said plaintively. "As you love me, Bridgie, can you deny it scoops?" And as if to illustrate the truth of her words she twisted her head so as to present her little profile for her sister's inspection.

Truly it was not a classic outline! Sketched in bare outline it would have lacerated an artist's eye, but then more things than line go to the making up a girlish face: there is youth, for instance, and a blooming complexion; there is vivacity, and sweetness, and an intangible something which for want of a better name we call "charm." Mrs Victor beheld all these attributes in her sister's face, and her eyes softened as they looked, but her voice was still resentful.

"Of course it scoops. It always *did* scoop. I like it to scoop."

"I like them straight!" persisted Pixie. "And it isn't as if it stopped at the nose. There's my mouth—"

Bridgie's laugh had a tender, reminiscent ring.

"The Mammoth Cave of Kentucky! D'you remember the Major's old name? He was *proud* of your mouth. And you had no chin as a child. You ought to be thankful, Pixie, that you've grown to a chin!"

"I am," cried Pixie with unction. "It would be awful to slope down into your neck. All the same, me dear, if it was my eyes that were bigger, and my mouth that was smaller, it would be better for all concerned." She was silent for some moments, staring thoughtfully in the fire. From time to time she frowned, and from time to time she smiled; Bridgie divined that a thought was working, and lay back in her seat, amusedly watching its development. "There's a place in Paris," continued Pixie thoughtfully at last, "an institute sort of place, where they repair noses! You sort of go in, and they look at you, and there are models and drawings, and *you choose your nose*! The manager is an expert, and if you choose a wrong style he advises, and says another would suit you better. I'd love a Greek one myself; it's so *chic* to float down straight from the forehead, but I expect he'd advise a blend that wouldn't look too *épatant* with my other features.—It takes a fortnight, and it doesn't hurt. Your nose is gelatine, not bone; and it costs fifty pounds."

"Wicked waste!" cried Mrs Victor, with all the fervour of a matron whose own nose is beyond reproach. "Fifty pounds on a nose! I never heard of such foolish extravagance."

"Esmeralda paid eighty for a sealskin coat. A nose would last for life, while if a single moth got inside the brown paper—whew!" Pixie waved her hands with the Frenchiness of gesture which was the outcome of an education abroad, and which made an amusing contrast with an Irish accent, unusually pronounced. "I'd think nothing of running over to Paris for a fortnight's jaunt, and having the nose thrown in. Fancy me walking in on you all, before you'd well realised I was away, smart and smiling with a profile like Clytie, or a sweet little acquiline, or a neat and wavey one, like your own. You wouldn't know me!"

"I shouldn't!" said Bridgie eloquently.

"Now let's pretend!" Pixie hitched her chair nearer to the fire, and placed her little feet on the fender with an air of intense enjoyment. In truth, tea-time, and the opportunity which it gave of undisturbed parleys with Bridgie, ranked as one of the great occasions of life. Every day there seemed something fresh and exciting to discuss, and the game of "pretend" made unfailing appeal to the happy Irish natures, but it was not often that such an original and thrilling topic came under discussion. A repaired nose! Pixie warmed to the theme with the zest of a skilled *raconteur*. ... "You'd be sitting here, and I'd walk in in my hat and veil—a new-fashioned scriggley veil, as a sort of screen. We'd kiss. If it was a long kiss, you'd feel the point, being accustomed to a button, and that would give it away, but I'd make it short so you'd notice nothing, and I'd sit down with my back to the light, and we'd talk. 'Take off your hat,' you'd say. 'In a moment,' I'd answer. 'Not yet, me dear, my hair's untidy.' 'You look like a visitor,' you'd say, 'with your veil drawn down.' 'It's a French one,' I'd say. 'It becomes me, doesn't it? Three francs fifty,' and you'd frown, and stare, and say, 'Does it? I don't know! You look—different, Pixie. You don't look—yourself!'"

The real Pixie gurgled with enjoyment, and Bridgie Victor gurgled in response.

"Then I'd protest, and ask what was the matter, and say if there was anything, it must be the veil, and if there was a change wasn't it honestly for the better, and I'd push up my veil and smile at you; smile languidly across the room. I can see your face, poor darling! All scared and starey, while I turned round s-lowly, s-lowly, until I was sideways towards you, with me elegant Grecian nose..."

Bridgie shuddered.

"I'd not live through it! It would break my heart. With a Grecian nose you might be Patricia, but you couldn't possibly be Pixie. It's too horrible to think of!"

But Pixie had in her nature a reserve of obstinacy, and in absolutely good-natured fashion could "hang on" to a point through any amount of discouragement.

"Now, since you mention it, that's another argument in my favour," she said quickly. "It's hard on a girl of twenty to be bereft of her legal name because of incompatibility with her features. Now, with a Grecian nose—"

Bridgie sat up suddenly, and cleared her throat. The time had come to remember her own position as married sister and guardian, and put a stop to frivolous imaginings.

"May I ask," she demanded clearly, "exactly in what manner you would propose to raise the fifty pounds? Your nose is your own to do what you like with—or will be at the end of another year—but—"

"The fifty pounds isn't! I know it," said Pixie. She did not sigh, as would have seemed appropriate at such a moment, but exhibited rather a cheerful and gratified air, as though her own poverty were an amusing peculiarity which added to the list of her attractions.

"Of course, my dear, nobody ever dreamt for a moment it could be *done*, but it's always interesting to pretend. Don't we amuse ourselves for hours pretending to be millionaires, when you're all of a flutter about eighteen-pence extra in the laundry bill? I wonder at *you*, Bridgie, pretending to be practical."

"I'm sorry," said Bridgie humbly. A pang of conscience pierced her heart, for had it not been her own extravagance which had swelled the laundry bill by that terrible eighteen-pence? Penitence engendered a more tender spirit, and she said gently—

"We love your looks, Pixie. To us you seem lovely and beautiful."

"Bless your blind eyes! I know I do. But," added Pixie astonishingly, "I wasn't thinking of you!"

"*Not!*" A moment followed of sheer, gaping surprise, for Bridgie Victor was so accustomed to the devotion of her young sister,

so placidly, assured that the quiet family life furnished the girl with, everything necessary for her happiness, that the suggestion of an outside interest came as a shock. "Not!" she repeated blankly. "Then—then—who?"

"My lovers!" replied Pixie calmly.

And looking back through the years, it always seemed to Bridgie Victor that with the utterance of those words the life of Pixie O'Shaughnessy entered upon a new and absorbing phase.

Chapter Two.

Pixie's Views on Marriage.

Bridgie Victor sat gazing at her sister in a numb bewilderment. It was the first, the very first time that the girl had breathed a word concerning the romantic possibilities of her own life, and even Bridgie's trained imagination failed to rise to the occasion. Pixie! Lovers! Lovers! Pixie! ... The juxtaposition of ideas was too preposterous to be grasped. Pixie was a child, the baby of the family, just a bigger, more entertaining baby to play with the tinies of the second generation, who treated her as one of themselves, and one and all scorned to bestow the title of "aunt."

There was a young Patricia in the nursery at Knock Castle, and a second edition in the Victor nursery upstairs; but though the baptismal name of the little sister had been copied, not even the adoring mothers themselves would have dreamed of borrowing the beloved pet name, Pixie's nose might not be to her approval; it might even scoop—to be perfectly candid, it *did* scoop—but it had never yet been put out of joint. The one and only, the inimitable Pixie, she still lived enthroned in the hearts of her brothers and sisters, as something specially and peculiarly their own.

So it was that a pang rent Bridgie's heart at the realisation that the little sister was grown-up, was actually twenty years of age—past twenty, going to be twenty-one in a few more months, and that the time was approaching when a stranger might have the audacity to steal her from the fold. To her own heart, Bridgie realised the likelihood of such a theft, and the

naturalness thereof: outwardly, for Pixie's benefit she appeared shocked to death.

"L-lovers!" gasped Bridgie. "Lovers! Is it you, Pixie O'Shaughnessy, I hear talking of such things? I'm surprised; I'm shocked! I never could have believed you troubled your head about such matters."

"But I do," asserted Pixie cheerfully. "Lots. Not to say *trouble*, exactly, for it's most agreeable. I pretend about them, and decide what they'll be like. When I see a man that takes my fancy, I add him to the list. Mostly they're clean-shaved, but I saw one the other day with a beard—" She lifted a warning finger to stay Bridgie's cry of protest. "Not a straggler, but a naval one, short and trim; and you wouldn't believe how becoming it was! I decided then to have one with a beard. And they are mostly tall and handsome, and rolling in riches, so that I can buy anything I like, nose included. But one must be poor and sad, because that," announced Pixie, in her most radiant fashion, "would be good for my character. I'd be sorry for him, the creature! And, as they say in books, 'twould soften me. Would you say honestly, now, Bridgie, that I'm in *need* of softening?"

"I should not. I should say you were soft enough already. *Too* soft!" declared Bridgie sternly. "'Them,' indeed! Plural, I'll trouble you! Just realise, my child, that there are not enough men to go round, and don't waste time making pictures of a chorus who will never appear. If you have *one* lover, it will be more than your share; and it's doubtful if you ever get that."

"I doubt it," maintained Pixie sturdily. "I'm plain, but I've a way. You know yourself, me dear, I've a way! ... I'm afraid I'll have lots; and that's the trouble of it, for as sure as you're there, Bridgie, I'll accept them all! 'Twouldn't be in my heart to say no, with a nice man begging to be allowed to take care of me. I'd love him on the spot for being so kind; or if I didn't, and I saw him upset, it would seem only decent to comfort him, so 'twould end the same way. ... It breaks my heart when the girls refuse the nice man in books, and I always long to be able to run after him when he leaves the room—ashy pale, with a nerve twitching beside his eye—and ask him will I do instead! If I feel like that to another girl's lover, what will I do to my own?"

Bridgie stared aghast. Her brain was still reeling from the shock of hearing Pixie refer to the subject of lovers at all, and here was yet another problem looming ahead. With a loving grasp of her sister's character, she realised that the protestations to

which she had just listened embodied a real danger. Pixie had always been "the soft-heartedest creature," who had never from her earliest years been known to refuse a plea for help. It would only be in keeping with her character if she accepted a suitor out of pure politeness and unwillingness to hurt his feelings. Bridgie was a happy wife, and for that very reason was determined that if care and guidance, if authority, and persuasion, and precept, and a judicious amount of influence could do it, Pixie should never be married, unless it were to the right man. She therefore adopted her elderly attitude once more, and said firmly—

"It's very wicked and misguided even to talk in such a way. When the time comes that a man asks you to marry him—if it ever comes—it will be your first and foremost duty to examine your own heart and see if you love him enough to live with him all his life, whether he is ill or well, or rich or poor, or happy or sad. You will have to decide whether you would be happier with him in trouble or free by yourself, and you'd have to remember that it's not always too easy managing a house, and—and walking about half the night with a teething baby, and darning socks, when you want to go out, and wearing the same dress three years running, even if you love the man you've married. Of course, some girls marry rich husbands—like Esmeralda; but that's rare. Far more young couples begin as we did, with having to be careful about every shilling; and that, my dear, is *not* agreeable! You need to be *very* fond of a man to make it worth while to go on short commons all your life. You need to think things over very carefully, before you accept an offer of marriage."

Pixie sat listening, her head cocked to one side, with the air of a bright, intelligent bird. When Bridgie had finished speaking she sighed and knitted her brows, and stared thoughtfully into the fire. It was obvious that she was pondering over what had been said, and did not find herself altogether in agreement with the rules laid down.

"You mean," she said slowly, "that I should have to think altogether of *myself* and what would suit *Me* and make *me* happy? That's strange, now; that's very strange! To bring a girl up all her life to believe it's her duty in every small thing that comes along to put herself last and her family in front, and then when she's a grown-up woman, and a man comes along who believes, poor thing! that she could help him and make him happy, *then* just at that moment you tell her to be selfish and think only of herself. ... 'Tis not that way I'll conduct my love

affairs!" cried Pixie O'Shaughnessy. Her eyes met Bridgie's, and flashed defiance. "When I meet a man who needs me I'll find my own happiness in helping *him*!"

"Bless you, darling!" said Bridgie softly. "I am quite sure you will. ... It's a very, very serious time for a woman when the question of marriage comes into her life. You can't treat it *too* seriously. I have not thought of it so far in connection with you, but now that I do I'll pray about it, Pixie! I'll pray for you, that you may be guided to a right choice. You'll pray that for yourself, won't you, dear?"

"I will," said Pixie quietly. "I do. And for him—the man I may marry. I've prayed for him quite a long time."

"The ... the *man*!" Bridgie was so surprised as to appear almost shocked. "My dear, you don't know him!"

"But he is alive, isn't he? He must be, if I'm going to marry him. Alive, and grown-up, and living, perhaps, not so far away. Perhaps he's an orphan, Bridgie; or if he has a home, perhaps he's had to leave it and live in a strange town. ... Perhaps he's in lodgings, going home every night to sit alone in a room. Perhaps he's trying to be good, and finding it very hard. Perhaps there's no one in all the world to pray for him but just me. *Bridgie*! If I'm going to love him how can I *not* pray?"

Mrs Victor rose hurriedly from her seat, and busied herself with the arrangement of the curtains. They were heavy velvet curtains, which at night-time drew round the whole of the large bay window which formed the end of the pretty, cosy room. Bridgie took especial pleasure in the effect of a great brass vase which, on its oaken pedestal, stood sharply outlined against the rich, dark folds. She moved its position now, moved it back into its original place, and touched the leaves of the chrysanthemum which stood therein with a caressing hand. Six years' residence in a town had not sufficed to teach the one-time mistress of Knock Castle to be economical when purchasing flowers. "I can't live without them. It's not my fault if they are dear!" she would protest to her own conscience at the sight of the florist's bill.

And in truth, who could expect a girl to be content with a few scant blossoms when she had lived all her early age in the midst of prodigal plenty! In spring the fields had been white with snowdrops. Sylvia sent over small packing-cases every February, filled with hundreds and hundreds of little tight bunches of the spotless white flowers, and almost every woman of Bridgie's acquaintance rejoiced with her on their arrival. After

the snowdrops came on the wild daffodils and bluebells and primroses. They arrived in cases also, fragrant with the scent which was really no scent at all, but just the incarnation of everything fresh, and pure, and rural. Then came the blossoming of trees. Bridgie sighed whenever she thought of blossom, for that was one thing which would *not* pack; and the want of greenery too, that was another cross to the city dweller. She longed to break off great branches of trees, and place them in corners of the room; she longed to wander into the fields and pick handfuls of grasses, and honeysuckle, and prickly briar sprays. Who could blame her for taking advantage of what compensation lay within reach?

This afternoon, however, the contemplation of the tawny chrysanthemums displayed in the brass vase failed to inspire the usual joy. Bridgie's eyes were bright indeed as she turned back into the room, but it was the sort of brightness which betokens tears repressed. She laid her hand on the little sister's shoulders, and spoke in the deepest tone of her tender Irish voice—

"What has been happening to you, my Pixie, all this time when I've been treating you as a child? Have you been growing up quietly into a little woman?"

Pixie smiled up into her face—a bright, unclouded smile.

"Faith," she said, radiantly, "I believe. I have!"

Chapter Three.

Nearly Twenty-one!

Bridgie rang the bell to have the tea-things removed and a message sent to the nursery that the children might descend without further delay. It was still a few minutes before the orthodox hour, but the conversation had reached a point when a distraction would be welcome, and Jack and Patsie were invariably prancing with impatience from the moment when the smell of hot potato cakes ascended from below.

They came with a rush, pattering down the staircase with a speed which made Bridgie gasp and groan, and bursting open the door entered the room at the double. Jack was five, and wore a blue tunic with an exceedingly long-waisted belt,

beneath which could be discerned the hems of abbreviated knickers. Patricia was three, and wore a limp white frock reaching to the tips of little red shoes. She had long brown locks, and eyes of the true O'Shaughnessy grey, and was proudly supposed to resemble her beautiful aunt Joan. Jack was fair, with linty locks and a jolly brown face. His mouth might have been smaller and still attained a fair average in size, but for the time being his pretty baby teeth filled the cavern so satisfactorily, that no one could complain.

Both children made straight for their mother, smothered her with "Bunnie" hugs, and then from the shelter of her arms cast quick, questioning glances across the fireplace. There was in their glance a keenness, a curiosity, almost amounting to awe, which would at once have arrested the attention of an onlooker. It was not in the least the smiling glance of recognition which is accorded to a member of the household on meeting again after one of the short separations of the day; it resembled far more the half-nervous, half-pleasurable shrinking from an introduction to a stranger, about whom was wrapped a cloak of deepest mystery. As for Pixie herself she sat bolt upright in her seat, staring fixedly into space, and apparently unconscious of the children's presence.

Presently Jack took a tentative step forward, and Patsie followed in his wake. Half a yard from Pixie's chair they stopped short with eager, craning faces, with bodies braced in readiness for a flying retreat.

"Pixie!"

No answer. Still the rigid, immovable figure. Still the fixed and staring eye.

"P-ixie!"

The eyes rolled; a deep, hollow voice boomed forth—

"I'm *not* Pixie!"

The expected had happened. They had known it was coming; would have been bitterly disappointed if it had failed, nevertheless they writhed and capered as though overcome with amazement.

"P-ixie, Pixie, Who—Are—You—Now?"

"I'm a wild buffalo of the plains!" answered Pixie unexpectedly, and as a wild buffalo she comported herself for the next half-hour, ambling on hands and knees round the room, while the children wreathed her neck with impromptu garlands made of wools from their mother's work-basket, and made votive offerings of sofa cushions, footstools, and india-rubber toys.

In the midst of the uproar Bridgie jumped from her seat and flew to the door, her ears sharp as ever to hear the click of her husband's latch-key. The greeting in the narrow hall was delightfully lover-like for a married couple of six years' standing, and they entered the drawing-room arm-in-arm, smiling with a contentment charming to witness. Captain Victor was satisfied that no one in the world possessed such an altogether delightful specimen of womanhood as his "bride." She was so sweet, so good, so unselfish, and in addition to these sterling qualities, she was so cheerful, so spontaneous, so unexpected, that it was impossible for life to grow dull and monotonous while she was at the head of the household.

He acknowledged tenderly, and with a shrug of the shoulders to express resignation, that she *might* have been a cleverer housekeeper and just a thought more economical in expenditure! but considering her happy-go-lucky upbringing under the most thriftless of fathers, the darling really deserved more praise for what she accomplished than blame for what was left undone.

Bridgie, on the contrary, considered that Dick worried his head ridiculously about ways and means. Not for the world and all that it contained would she have accused him of being *mean*: she merely shrugged *her* shoulders and reminded herself that he was English, poor thing! English people had a preference for seeing money visibly in their purses before they spent it, while she herself had been brought up in a cheerful confidence that it would "turn up" somehow to pay the bills which had been incurred in faith.

Captain Victor displayed not the faintest astonishment at discovering his sister-in-law on all fours, nor did he appear overcome to be introduced to her as a buffalo of the plains. He smiled at her almost as tenderly as at his own babies, and said—

"How do, Buff! Pleased to have met you. So kind of you to make hay in my drawing-room," which reproof brought Pixie quickly to her rightful position. That was another English characteristic of Dick Victor—he hated disorder, and was not appreciative of

uproar on his return from a day's work. Therefore there were picture-books in waiting for his return, and after a few minutes parleying Pixie cajoled the children into the dining-room on the plea of a bigger and more convenient table for the display of their treasures, leaving the husband and wife alone.

Dick lay back in his easy chair, and stretched himself with an involuntary sigh of relief. He was devoted to his children, but a quiet chat with Bridgie was the treat *par excellence* at this hour of the day when he was tired and in need of rest. He stretched out a hand towards her, and she stroked it with gentle fingers.

"Ye're tired, dear. Will I get you a cup of tea? It's not long since it went out. If I poured some hot-water in the pot..."

Dick shuddered.

"Thank you, ma'am, *no*! If I have any, I'll have it fresh, but I don't care about it to-day. It's nice just to rest and talk. Anything happened to you to-day?"

"There always does. It's the most exciting thing in the world to be the mistress of a household," said Bridgie, with relish. There were few days when Captain Victor was not treated to a history of accidents and contretemps on his return home, but unlike most husbands he rather anticipated than dreaded the recital, for Bridgie so evidently enjoyed it herself, taking a keen retrospective joy over past discomfitures.

The Victor household had its own share of vicissitudes, more than its share perhaps, but through them all there survived a spirit of kindness and good fellowship which took away more than half the strain. Maidservants arriving in moods of suspicion and antagonism found themselves unconsciously unarmed by the cheery, kindly young mistress, who administered praise more readily than blame, and so far from "giving herself airs" treated them with friendly kindness and consideration. On the very rare occasions when a girl was poor-spirited enough to persist in her antagonism, off she went with a month's money in her pocket, for the peace of her little home was the greatest treasure in the world to Bridgie Victor, and no hireling could be allowed to disturb it. The service in the little house might not be as mechanically perfect as in some others, the meals might vary in excellence, but that was a secondary affair. "If a bad temper is a necessary accompaniment of a good cook, then—give me herbs!" she would cry, shrugging her pretty shoulders, and her husband agreed—with reservations!

He was a very happy, a very contented man, and every day of his life he thanked God afresh for his happy home, for his children, for the greatest treasure of all, sweet Bridget, his wife!

To-day, however, the disclosure had nothing to do with domestic revolutions, and Bridgie's tone in making her announcement held an unusual note of tragedy.

"Dick, guess what! You'll never guess! Pixie's grown-up!"

For a moment Captain Victor looked as was expected of him—utterly bewildered. He lay back in his chair, his handsome face blank and expressionless, the while he stared steadily at his wife, and Bridgie stared back, her distress palpably mingled with complacency. Speak she would not, until Dick had given expression to his surprise. She sat still, therefore, shaking her head in a melancholy mandarin fashion, which had the undesired effect of restoring his complacency.

"My darling, what unnecessary woe! It's astounding, I grant you; one never expected such a feat of Pixie; but the years *will* pass—there's no holding them, unfortunately. How old is she, by the way? Seventeen, I suppose—eighteen?"

"*Twenty*—nearly twenty-one!"

Bridgie's tone was tragic, and Dick Victor in his turn looked startled and grave. He frowned, bit his lip, and stared thoughtfully across the room.

"Twenty-one? Is it possible? Grown-up, indeed! Bridgie, we should have realised this before. We have been so content with things as they were that we've been selfishly blind. If Pixie is over twenty we have not been treating her fairly. We have treated her too much as a child. We ought to have entertained for her, taken her about."

Bridgie sighed, and dropped her eyelids to hide the twinkle in her eyes. Like most husbands Dick preferred a quiet domestic evening at the end of a day abroad: like most wives Bridgie would have enjoyed a little diversion at the end of a day at home. Sweetly and silently for nearly half a dozen years she had subdued her preferences to his, feeling it at once her pleasure and her duty to do so, but now, if duty suddenly assumed the guise of a gayer, more sociable life, then most cheerfully would Irish Bridgie accept the change.

"I think, dear," she said primly, "it *would* be wise. Esmeralda has said so many a time, but I took no notice. I never did take any notice of Esmeralda, but she was right this time, it appears, and I was wrong. Imagine it! Pixie began bemoaning that she was not pretty, and it was not herself she was grieving for, or you, or *Me!*"—Bridgie's voice sounded a crescendo of amazement over that last pronoun—"but whom do you suppose? You'll never guess! Her future *lovers!*"

It was just another instance of the provokingness of man that at this horrible disclosure Dick threw himself back in his chair in a peal of laughter; he laughed and laughed till the tears stood in his eyes, and Bridgie, despite herself, joined in the chorus. The juxtaposition of Pixie and lovers had proved just as startling to him as to his wife, but while she had been scandalised, he was frankly, whole-heartedly amused.

"Pixie!" he cried. "Pixie with a lover! It would be about as easy to think of Patsie. Dear, quaint little Pixie! Who dares to say she isn't pretty? Her funny little nose, her big, generous mouth are a hundred times more charming than the ordinary pretty face. I'll tell you what it is, darling,"—he sobered suddenly;—"Pixie's lover, whoever he may be, will be an uncommonly lucky fellow!"

Husband and wife sat in silence for some moments after this, hand in hand, as their custom was in hours of privacy, while the thoughts of each pursued the same subject—Pixie's opening life and their own duty towards it.

On both minds was borne the unwilling realisation that their own home was not the ideal abode to afford the experience of life, the open intercourse with young people of her own age which it was desirable that the girl should now enjoy. As a means of adding to his income Captain Victor had accepted the position of adjutant to a volunteer corps in a northern city, and, as comparatively new residents, his list of acquaintances was but small.

Esmeralda, or to speak more correctly, Joan, the second daughter of the O'Shaughnessy family, as the wife of the millionaire, Geoffrey Hilliard, possessed a beautiful country seat not sixty miles from town, while Jack, the eldest brother, had returned to the home of his fathers, Knock Castle, in Ireland, on the money which his wife had inherited from her father, after he had become engaged to her in her character of a penniless damsel. Jack was thankful all his life to remember that fact, though his easy-going Irish nature found nothing to worry about

in the fact that the money was legally his wife's, and not his own.

Both Esmeralda as a society queen, and Sylvia as chatelaine of Knock, had opportunities of showing life to a young girl, with which Bridgie in her modest little home in a provincial town could not compete. Nevertheless, the heart of the tender elder sister was loath to part from her charge at the very moment when watchfulness and guidance were most important. She fought against the idea; assured herself that there was time, plenty of time. What, after all, was twenty-one? In two, three years one might talk about society; in the meantime let the child be! And Captain Victor, in his turn, looked into the future, and saw his Bridgie left sisterless in this strange town, bereft all day long of the society of the sweetest and most understanding of companions, and he, too, sighed, and asked himself what was the hurry. Surely another year, a couple of years! And then, being *one* in reality as well as in name, the eyes of husband and wife met and lingered, and, as if at the sweep of an angel's wing, the selfish thoughts fell away, and they faced their duty and accepted it once for all.

Bridgie leaned her head on her husband's shoulder and sighed thankfully.

"I have you, Dick, and the children! 'Twould be wicked to complain."

And Dick murmured gruffly—

"I want no one but you," and held her tightly in his arms, while Bridgie sniffed, and whimpered, like one of her own small children.

"But if P-ixie—if Pixie is unhappy—if any wretched man breaks Pixie's heart—"

"He couldn't!" Dick Victor said firmly. "No man could. That's beyond them. Heart's like Pixie's don't break, Honey! I don't say they, may not ache at times, but breaking is a different matter. Your bantling is grown-up: you can keep her no longer beneath your wing. She must go out into the world, and work and suffer like the rest, but she'll win through. Pixie the woman will be a finer creature than Pixie the child!"

But Bridgie hid her face, and the tears rushed into her eyes, for hers was the mother's heart which longed ever to succour and

protect, and Pixie was the child whom a dying father had committed to her care. It was hard to let Pixie go.

Chapter Four.

The Invitation.

The immediate consequence of the Pixie pronouncement was a correspondence between her two elder sisters, wherein Bridgie ate humble-pie, and Esmeralda rode the high horse after the manner born.

"You were right about Pixie, darling. It *is* dull for her here in this strange town, where we have so few friends; and now that she is nearly twenty-one it does not seem right to shut her up. She ought to go about and see the world, and meet boys and girls of her own age. And so, dear, would it be convenient to you to have her for a few months until you go up to town? Your life in the country will seem a whirl of gaiety after our monotonous jog-trot, and she has been so useful and diligent, helping me these last years with never a thought for her own enjoyment, that she deserves all the fun she can get. I am sad at parting from her, but if it's for her good I'll make the effort. She has two nice new frocks, and I could get her another for parties." Thus Bridgie. Esmeralda's reply came by return—the big, slanting writing, plentifully underlined—

"*At last*, my dear, you have come to your senses. For a sweet-tempered person, you certainly have, as I've told you before, a surprising amount of obstinacy. In future do try to believe that in matters of worldly wisdom I know best, and be ruled by me!

"Pixie can come at once—the sooner the better, but for pity's sake, my dear, spare me the frocks. Felice can run her up a few things to last until I have time to take her to town. If I am to take her about, she must be dressed to please *me*, and do *me* credit.

"We have people coming and going all the time, and I'll be thankful to have her. I wouldn't say so for the world, Bridgie, but you *have* been selfish about Pixie! Never a bit of her have I had to myself; she has come for the regular Christmas visits, of course, and sometimes in summer, but it's always been with you and Dick and the children; it's only the leavings of attention she's had to spare for any one else. Now my boys will have a

chance! Perhaps she can keep them in order—I can't! They are the pride and the shame, and the joy and the grief, and the sunshine and the—thunder and lightning and earthquake of my life. Bridgie, did you ever think it would feel like that to be a mother? I thought it would be all pure joy, but there's a big ache mixed in—

"Geoff was so naughty this morning, so disobedient and rude, and I prayed, Bridgie—I shut myself in my room and prayed for patience, and then went down and spoke to him so sweetly. You'd have loved to hear me. I said: 'If you want to grow up a good, wise man like father, you must learn to be gentle and polite. Did you ever hear father speak rudely to me?'—'Oh, no,' says he, quite simply, '*but I've often heard you speak rudely to him!*' Now, what was a poor misguided mother to say to that? Especially when it was True! You are never cross, so your youngsters can never corner you like that; but I am—often! Which proves that I need Pixie more than you do, and she'd better hurry along."

Pixie came lightly into the dining-room, just as Bridgie was reading the last words of the letter. She was almost invariably late for breakfast, a fact which was annoying to Captain Victor's soldierly sense of punctuality. He looked markedly at the clock, and Pixie said genially, "I apologise, me dear. The young need sleep!" Then she fell to work at her porridge with healthy enjoyment. She wore a blue serge skirt and a bright, red silk shirt, neatly belted by a strip of patent-leather. The once straggly locks were parted in the middle, and swathed round a little head which held itself jauntily aloft; her eyes danced, her lips curved. It was a bare eight o'clock in the morning, a period when most people are languid and half-awake. But there was no languor about Pixie; she looked intensely, brilliantly alive. A stream of vitality seemed to emanate from her little form and fill the whole room. The dog stirred on the rug and rose to his feet; the canary hopped to a higher perch and began to sing; Dick Victor felt an access of appetite, and helped himself to a second egg and more bacon.

"This is Wednesday," announced Pixie genially, "and it's fine. I love fine Wednesdays! It's a habit from the old school-time, when they were half-holidays, and meant so, much. ... I wonder what nice thing will happen to-day."

Husband and wife exchanged a glance. They knew and loved this habit of expecting happiness, and looking forward to the joys rather than the sorrows of the future, which had all her life, been characteristic of Pixie O'Shaughnessy. They realised that it

was to this quality of mind, rather than to external happenings, that she owed her cheerful serenity, but this morning it was impossible not to wonder how she would view the proposed change of abode.

"I've had a letter from Esmeralda," announced Bridgie baldly from behind the urn, and, quick as thought, Pixie's sharp eyes searched her face.

"But that's not nice. It's given you a wrinkle. Take no notice, and she'll write to-morrow to say she's sorry. She's got to worry or die, but there's no reason why you should die too. Roll it up into spills, and forget all about it."

"I can't—it's important. And she's not worrying. It's very—" Bridgie paused for a moment, just one moment, to swallow that accusation of selfishness—"kind! Pixie darling, it's about *You*."

"Me!" cried Pixie, and dropped her spoon with a clang. Bridgie had already pushed back her chair from the table; Pixie pushed hers to follow suit. Such a prosaic affair as breakfast had plainly vanished from their thoughts, but Captain Victor had by no means forgotten, nor did it suit him to face emotional scenes to an accompaniment of bacon and eggs.

"*After* breakfast, please!" he cried, in what his wife described as his "barracks" voice, and which had the effect in this instance of making her turn on the tap of the urn so hurriedly that she had not had time to place her cup underneath. She blushed and frowned. Pixie deftly moved the toast-rack so as to conceal the damage, and proceeded to eat a hearty breakfast with undiminished appetite.

It was not until Captain Victor had left the room to pay his morning visit to the nursery, that Bridgie again referred to her sister's letter, and then her first words were of reproach.

"How you could sit there, Pixie, eating your breakfast, as calm as you please, when you knew there was news—news that concerned yourself!"

"I was hungry," said Pixie calmly. "And I love excitement; it's the breath of my nostrils. All the while I was making up stories, with myself as heroine. I'm afraid it will be only disappointment I'll feel when you tell me. Truth is so tame, compared to imagination. Besides, there was Dick!" She smiled a forbearing, elderly smile. "You can't live in the house with Dick without learning self-control. He's so—"

"He's not!" contradicted Dick's wife, with loyal fervour. "Dick was quite right; he always is. It was his parents who were to blame for making him English." She sighed, and stared reflectively out of the window. "We ought to be thankful, Pixie, that we are Irish through and through. It means so much that English people can't even understand—seeing jokes when they are sad, and happiness when they are bored and being poor and not caring, and miserable and forgetting, and interested, and excited—"

"Every single hour!" concluded Pixie deeply, and they laughed in concert. In the contemplation of the advantages of an Irish temperament they had come near forgetting the real subject of discussion, but the sight of the letter on the table before her recalled it to Bridgie's remembrance. She straightened her back and assumed an air of responsibility, a natural dramatic instinct prompting her to play her part in appropriate fashion.

"Dick and I have been feeling, my dear, that as you are now really grown-up, you ought to be having a livelier time than we can give you in this strange town, and Esmeralda has been saying the same thing for years past. She feels we have been rather selfish in keeping you so much to ourselves, and thinks that it is her turn to have you to live with her for a time. We think so too, Pixie. Not for altogether, of course. For three or four months, say; and then you might go over to Knock, and come back to us again for Christmas. Of course, darling, you understand that we don't *want* you to go!"

Pixie stared silently across the table. She had grown rather white, and her brows were knitted in anxious consideration.

"Bridget Victor," she said solemnly, "is it the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth you are telling me, or is it just an excuse to get me out of the way? If there's any trouble, or worry, or illness, or upset coming on, that you want to spare me because I'm young, you'd better know at once that it will only be the expense of the journey wasted, for on the very first breath of it I'd fly back to you if it was across the world!"

"I know it," said Bridgie, and blinked back a tear. "But it's the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, Pixie, that we are the happiest, and the healthiest, and the contentedest little family in the country, and there's no need to worry about us. We were thinking only of you, and you are free in this instance to think only of yourself."

"That's agreeable!" was Pixie's comment. The frown left her brow and she smiled, the wide lips parting to show brilliantly white little teeth, teeth very nearly as pretty and infantile as those belonging to the small Patsie upstairs. Beholding that smile, Bridgie had no doubt as to the verdict which she was about to hear, and suffered an unreasoning pang of disappointment.

"Then I'll confess to you, my dear," continued Pixie affably, "that I find myself just in the mood for excitement. So long as you are well there's nothing on earth I'd love so much at this moment as to go off on a junket. If Esmeralda wants to give me a good time, let the poor thing have her way—I'll not hinder her! I'll go, and I'll love it; but I'll not promise how long I shall stay—all sorts of things may happen."

"Yes," said Bridgie dreamily, "all sorts of things!"

And so Pixie O'Shaughnessy went forth to meet her fate.

Chapter Five.

In Marble Halls.

Mrs Geoffrey Hilliard, *née* Joan O'Shaughnessy, was the second daughter of the family, and had been christened Esmeralda "for short" by the brothers and sisters of whom she had been alternately the pride and the trial. The fantastic name had an appropriateness so undeniable that even Joan's husband had adopted it in his turn for use in the family circle, reserving the more dignified "Joan" for more ceremonious occasions.

"Esmeralda" had been a beauty from her cradle, and would be a beauty if she lived to be a hundred, for her proud, restless features were perfectly chiselled, and her great grey eyes, with the long black lashes on the upper and lower lid, were as eloquent as they were lovely. When she was angry, they seemed to send out veritable flashes of fire; when she was languid, the white lids drooped and the fringed eyelashes veiled them in a misty calm; when she was loving, when she held her boys in her arms, or spoke a love word in her husband's ear, ah! Then it was a joy indeed to behold the beauty of those limpid eyes! They "melted" indeed, not with tears, but with the very essence of tenderness and love.

"Esmeralda's so nice that you couldn't believe she was so horrid!" Pixie had declared once in her earlier years, and unfortunately there was still too much truth in the pronouncement.

Seven years of matrimony, and the responsibility of two young sons, had failed to discipline the hasty, intolerant nature, although they had certainly deepened the inner longing for improvement. Joan devotedly loved her husband, but accepted as her right his loyal devotion, and felt bitterly aggrieved when his forbearance occasionally gave way.

She adored her two small sons, and her theories on motherhood were so sweet and lofty that Bridgie, listening thereto, had been moved to tears. But in practice the theories were apt to go to the wall. To do Joan justice she would at any time have marched cheerfully to the stake if by so doing she could have saved her children from peril, but she was incapable of being patient during one long rainy afternoon, when confinement in the house had aroused into full play those mischievous instincts characteristic of healthy and spirited youngsters; and if any one imagines that the two statements contradict each other, he has yet to learn that heroic heights of effort are easier of accomplishment than a steady jog-trot along a dull high-road.

Joan Hilliard's reflections on the coming of her younger sister were significant of her mental attitude. "Pixie's no trouble. She's such an easy soul. She fits into corners and fills in the gaps. She'll amuse the boys. It will keep them in good humour to have her to invent new games. She'll keep Geoff company at breakfast when I'm tired. I'll get some of the duty visits over while she's here. She'll talk to the bores, and be so pleased at the sound of her own voice that she'll never notice they don't answer. And she'll cheer me up when *I'm* bored. And, of course, I'll take her about—"

Pixie's amusement, it will be noticed, was but a secondary consideration to Joan's own ease and comfort; for though it may be a very enjoyable experience to be a society beauty and exchange poverty for riches, no one will be brave enough to maintain that such an experience is conducive to the growth of spiritual qualities. Sweet-hearted Bridgie might possibly have come unscathed through the ordeal, but Esmeralda was made of a different clay.

Pixie started alone on the three hours' journey, for the Victor household possessed no maid who could be spared, and husband and wife were both tied by home duties; moreover,

being a modern young woman, she felt perfectly competent to look after herself, and looked forward to the experience with pleasure rather than dread. Bridgie was inclined to be tearful at parting, and Pixie's artistic sense prompted a similar display, but she found herself simply incapable of forcing a tear.

"It's worse for you than for me," she confessed candidly, "for you've nothing to do, poor creature! But go home to cold mutton and darning, while I'm off to novelty and adventure. That's why the guests sometimes cry at a wedding, out of pity for themselves, because they can't go off on a honeymoon with a trousseau and an adoring groom. They pretend it's sympathetic emotion, but it isn't; it's nothing in the world but selfish regret. ... Don't cry, darling; it makes me feel so mean. Think of the lovely *tête-à-tête* this will mean for Dick and you!"

"Yes—in the evenings. I'll love that!" confessed Bridgie, with the candour of her race. "But oh, Pixie, the long, dull days, and no one to laugh with me at the jokes the English can't see, or to make pretend!—"

"Ah!" mourned Pixie deeply, "I'll miss that, too! The times we've had, imagining a fortune arriving by the afternoon post, and spending it all before dinner! All the fun, and none of the trouble. But it's dull, imagining all by oneself! And Dick's no good. He calls it waste of time! I shall marry an Irishman, Bridgie, when my time comes!"

"Get into the train and don't talk nonsense!" said Bridgie firmly. She felt it prophetic that on this eve of departure Pixie's remarks should again touch on husbands and weddings, but not for the world would she have hinted as much. She glanced at the other occupant of the carriage—a stout, middle-aged woman, and was on the point of inviting her chaperonage when a warning gleam in Pixie's eyes silenced the words on her lips. So presently the train puffed out of the station, and Bridgie Victor turned sadly homewards even as Pixie seated herself with a bounce, and smiled complacently into space.

"That's over!" she said to herself with a sigh of relief, glad as ever, to be done with painful things and able to look forward to the good to come. "She thinks she's miserable, the darling, but she'll be as happy as a grig the moment she gets back to Dick and the children. That's the worst of living with married sisters! They can manage so well without you. I'd prefer some one who was frantic if I turned my back—"

She smiled at the thought, and met an ingratiating smile upon the face of her travelling companion. The companion was stout and elderly, handsomely dressed, and evidently of a sociable disposition. It was the height of her ambition on a railway journey to meet another woman to whom she could shout confidences for hours upon end, but it was rarely that her sentiments were returned. Fate had been kind to her to-day in placing Pixie O'Shaughnessy in the same carriage.

"The young lady seemed quite distressed to leave you. Is she your sister?"

"She is. Do you think we are alike?"

"I—I wouldn't go so far as to say *alike*!" the large lady said blandly; "but there's a *look*! As I always say, there's no knowing where you are with a family likeness. My eldest girl—May—takes after her father; Felicia, the youngest, is the image of myself; yet they've been mistaken for each other times and again. It's a turn of the chin.—Is she married?"

"Who? Bridgie—my sister? Oh yes—very much. Six years."

"Dear me! She looks so young! My May is twenty-seven. She has had her chances, of course. Any children?"

"Wh—" Pixie's mind again struggled after the connection. "Oh, two—a boy and a girl. They are called," she added, with a benevolent consciousness of sparing further effort, "Patrick and Patricia."

"Irish, evidently," the large lady decided shrewdly. "Rather awkward, isn't it, about pet names, and laundry marks, and so forth? However. ... And so you've been paying her a visit, I suppose, and are returning to your home?"

"One of my homes," corrected Pixie happily. "I have three. Two sisters and one brother. And they all like to have me. My parents are dead." Her tone showed that the loss referred to was of many years' standing; nevertheless, the stout lady hurriedly changed the conversation, as though fearful of painful reminiscences.

"I have been having a morning's shopping. We live *quite* in the country, and I come to town every time I need a new gown. I have been arranging for one this morning, for a wedding. So difficult, when one has no ideas! I chose purple."

Pixie cocked her head on one side and thoughtfully pursed her lips.

"Very nice! Yes, purple's so—*portly*!" She surprised a puckering of the large lady's face, and hastened to supplement the description. "Portly, and—er—regal, and *duchessy*, don't you think? I met a duchess once—she was rather like you—and *she* wore purple!"

The large lady expanded in a genial warmth. Her lips opened in a breathless question—

"How was the bodice made?"

Pixie reflected deeply.

"I can't exactly say! But it was years ago. It would be quite *démodé*. For a wedding, of course, you must be up to date. Weddings make a fuss for months, and are so *soon* over—I mean for the guests. They are not *much* fun."

"Where did you meet the Duchess?"

"Oh, at my sister's—the one I am going to now. In her town house, at a reception one afternoon. She had a purple dress with lace, and a Queen Victoria sort of bonnet with strings, and little white feathers sticking up in the front; and she had a—" Pixie smiled into space with reminiscent enjoyment—"beautiful sense of humour!"

The large lady looked deeply impressed, and, beginning at the topmost ribbon on Pixie's hat, stared steadily downward to the tip of the little patent-leather shoe, evidently expecting to find points of unusual interest in the costume of a girl whose sister entertained a duchess in her town house. The train had rattled through a small hamlet and come out again into the open before she spoke again.

"Do you see many of them?"

"Which? What? Bonnets? Feathers? I don't think I quite—"

"Duchesses!" said the large lady deeply. And Pixie, who still preserved her childish love of cutting a dash, fought with, and overcame an unworthy temptation to invent several such titles on the spot.

"Not—many," she confessed humbly, "But, you see, I'm so young—I'm hardly 'out.' The sister with whom I've been living has not been able to entertain. Where I'm going it is different. I expect to be very gay."

The large lady nodded brightly.

"Quite right! Quite right! Only young once. Laugh while you may. I like to see young things enjoying themselves. ... And then you'll be getting engaged, and marrying."

"Oh, of course," assented Pixie, with an alacrity in such sharp contrast with the protests with which the modern girl sees fit to meet such prophecies, that the hearer was smitten not only with surprise but anxiety. An expression of real motherly kindness shone in her eyes as she fixed them upon the girl's small, radiant face.

"I hope it will be 'of course,' dear, and that you may be very, very happy; but it's a serious question. I'm an old-fashioned body, who believes in love. If it's the real thing it *lasts*, and it's about the only thing upon which you can count. Health comes and goes, and riches take wing. When I married Papa he was in tin-plates, and doing well, but owing to American treaties (you wouldn't understand!) we had to put down servants and move into a smaller house. Now, if I'd married him for money, how should I have felt *then*?"

Pixie wagged her head with an air of the deepest dejection. She was speculating as to the significance of tin-plates, but thought it tactful not to inquire.

"I hope—" she breathed deeply—"I hope the tin-plates—" and her companion gathered together her satchel and cloak in readiness for departure at the next station, nodding a cheerful reassurance.

"Oh, yes; *quite* prosperous again! Have been for years. But it only shows. ... And Papa has attacks of gout. They are trying, my dear, to *me*, as well as to himself; but if you love a man—well, it comes easier. ... Here's my station. So glad to have met you! I'll remember about the purple."

The train stopped, and the good lady alighted and passed through the wicket-gate, and her late companion watched her pass with a sentimental sigh.

“Ships that pass in the night, and signal each other in passing.’ She took to me, and I took to her. She’ll talk about me all evening to May and Felicia, and the tin-plate Papa, and ten chances to one we’ll never meet again. ‘It’s a sad world, my masters!’” sighed Pixie, and dived in her bag for a chocolate support.

The rest of the journey brought no companion so confidential, and Pixie was heartily glad to arrive at her destination, and as the train slackened speed to run into the station, to catch a glimpse of Esmeralda sitting straight and stately in a high cart ready to drive her visitor back to the Hall. Motors were very well in their way—useful trainlets ready to call at one’s own door and whirl one direct to the place where one would be, but the girl who had hunted with her father since she was a baby of four years old was never so happy as when she was in command of a horse. As the new-comer climbed up into the high seat the beautiful face was turned towards her with a smile as sweet and loving as Bridgie’s own.

“Well, Pixie! Ah, dearie, this is good. I’ve got you at last.”

“Esmeralda, *darling*! What an angel you look!”

“Don’t kiss me in public, *please*,” snapped Esmeralda, becoming prosaic with startling rapidity at the first hint of visible demonstration. She signalled to the groom, and off they went, trotting down the country lane in great contentment of spirits.

“How’s everybody?” asked Esmeralda. “Well? That’s right. You can tell me the details later on. Now, you have just to forget Bridgie for a bit, and think of *Me*. I’ve wanted you for years, and I told Bridgie to her face she was selfish to keep you away. If I’m not a good example, you can take example by my faults, and isn’t that just as good? And there’s so much that I want you to do. You always loved to help, didn’t you, Pixie?”

“I did,” assented Pixie, but the quick ears of the listener detected a hint of hesitation in the sound. The dark eyebrows arched in haughty questioning, and Pixie, no whit abashed, shrugged her shoulders and confessed with a laugh: “But to tell you the truth, my dear, it was not so much for helping, as for having a good time for myself, that I started on this trip. Bridgie said I’d been domestic long enough, and needed to play for a change, and there’s a well of something bubbling up inside me that longs, simply *longs*, for a vent. Of course, if one could combine the two...”

Joan Hilliard looked silently into the girl's bright face and made a mental comparison. She thought of the round of change and amusement which constituted her own life, and then of the little house in the northern city in which Pixie's last years had been spent; of the monotonous, if happy, round of duties, every day the same, from year's end to year's end, of the shortage of means, of friends, of opportunities, and a wave of compunction overwhelmed her. Esmeralda never did things by halves; neither had she any false shame about confessing her faults.

"I'm a selfish brute," she announced bluntly. "I deserve to be punished. If I go on like this I *shall* be some day! I'm always thinking of myself, when I'm not in a temper with some one else. It's an awful thing, Pixie, to be born into the world with a temper. And now, Geoff has inherited it from me." She sighed, shook the reins, and brightened resolutely. "Never mind, you *shall* have a good time, darling! There's a girl staying in the house now—you'll like her—and two young men, and lots of people coming in and out."

Pixie heaved a sigh of beatific content.

"To-night? At once? That's what I love—to tumble pell-mell into a whirl of dissipation. I never could bear to wait. I'm pining to see Geoffrey and the boys, and all your wonderful new possessions. You must be happy, Esmeralda, to have so much, and be so well, and pretty, and rich. Aren't you just burstingly happy?"

Joan did not answer. She stared ahead over the horse's head with a strange, rapt look in the wonderful eyes. An artist would have loved to paint her at that moment, but it would not have been as a type of happiness. The expression spoke rather of struggle, of restlessness, and want—a spiritual want which lay ever at the back of the excitement and glamour, clamouring to be filled.

Pixie looked at her sister, just once, and then averted her eyes. Hers was the understanding which springs from love, and she realised that her simple question had struck a tender spot. Instead of waiting for an answer she switched the conversation to ordinary, impersonal topics, and kept it there until the house was reached.

Tea was waiting in the large inner hall, and the girl visitor came forward to be introduced and shake hands. She was a slim, fair creature with masses of hair of a pale flaxen hue, swathed round her head, and held in place by large amber pins. Not a

hair was out of place—the effect was more like a bandage of pale brown silk than ordinary human locks. Her dress was made in the extreme of the skimpy fashion, and her little feet were encased in the most immaculate of silk shoes and stockings. She looked Pixie over in one quick, appraising glance, and Pixie stared back with widened eyes.

“My sister, Patricia O’Shaughnessy,” declaimed Esmeralda. Whereupon the strange girl bowed and repeated, “Miss Patricia O’Shaughnessy. Pleased to meet you,” in a manner which proclaimed her American birth as unmistakably as a flourish of the Stars and Stripes.

Then tea was brought in, and two young men joined the party, followed by the host, Geoffrey Hilliard, who gave the warmest of welcomes to his little sister-in-law. His kiss, the grasp of his hand, spoke of a deeper feeling than one of mere welcome, and Pixie had an instant perception that Geoffrey, like his wife, felt in need of help. The first glance had shown him more worn and tired than a man should be who has youth, health, a beautiful wife, charming children, and more money than he knows how to spend; but whatever hidden troubles might exist, they were not allowed to shadow this hour of meeting.

“Sure, and this is a sight for sore eyes!” he cried, with a would-be adaptation of an Irish accent. “You’re welcome, Pixie—a hundred times welcome. We’re overjoyed to see you, dear.”

Pixie beamed at him, with an attention somewhat diverted by the two young men who stared at her from a few yards’ distance. One was tall and fair, the other dark and thick set, and when Esmeralda swept forward to make the formal introductions it appeared that the first rejoiced in the name of Stanor Vaughan, and the second in the much more ordinary one of Robert Carr.

“My sister Patricia,” once more announced Mrs Hilliard, and though the young men ascribed Pixie’s blush to a becoming modesty, it arose in reality from annoyance at the sound of the high-sounding title which had been so persistently dropped all her life. Surely Esmeralda was not going to insist upon “Patricia!”

For a few moments everybody remained standing, the men relating their experiences of the afternoon, while Esmeralda waited for some further additions to the tea-table, and Pixie’s quick-seeing eyes roamed here and there gathering impressions to be stored away for later use. She was too excited, too

interested, to talk herself, but her ears were as quick as her eyes, and so it happened that she caught a fragment of conversation between Miss Ward and the tall Mr Vaughan, which was certainly not intended for her ears.

"...A *sister!*" he was repeating in tones of incredulous astonishment. "A sister! But how extraordinarily unlike! She must have thrown in her own beauty to add to Mrs Hilliard's share!"

"Oh, hush!" breathed the girl urgently. "*She heard!*"

Stanor Vaughan lifted his head sharply and met Pixie's watching eyes fixed upon him. His own glance was tense and shamed, but to his amazement hers was friendly, humorous, undismayed. There was no displeasure in her face, no hint of humiliation nor discomfiture—nothing, it would appear, but serene, unruffled agreement.

Stanor Vaughan had not a good memory: few events of his youth remained with him after middle life, but when he was an old, old man that moment still remained vivid, when, in the place of rebuke, he first met the radiance of Pixie. O'Shaughnessy's broad, sweet smile.

Chapter Six.

A Talk about Men—and Pickles.

Stanor Vaughan was deputed to take Pixie in to dinner that evening, an arrangement which at the beginning of the meal appeared less agreeable to him than to his partner. He cast furtive glances at the small, plain, yet mysteriously attractive little girl, who was the sister of the beautiful Mrs Hilliard, the while she ate her soup, and found himself attacked by an unusual nervousness. He didn't know what to say: he didn't know how to say it. He had made a bad start, and he wished with all his heart that he could change places with Carr and "rot" with that jolly Miss Ward. All the same, he found himself curiously attracted by this small Miss O'Shaughnessy, and he puzzled his handsome head to discover why.

There was no beauty in the little face, and, as a rule, Stanor, as he himself would have expressed it, had "no use" for a girl who was plain. What really attracted him was the happiness and

serenity which shone in Pixie's face, as light shines through the encircling glass, for to human creatures as to plants the great necessity of life is sun, and its attraction is supreme. Walk along a crowded street and watch the different faces of the men and women as they pass by—grey faces, drab faces, white faces, yellow faces, faces sad and cross, and lined and dull, faces by the thousand blank of any expression at all, and then here and there, at rare, rare intervals, a *live* face that speaks. You spy it afar off—a face with shining eyes, with lips curled ready for laughter, with arching brows, and tilted chin, and every little line and wrinkle speaking of *life*.

That face is as a magnet to attract not only eyes, but hearts into the bargain; the passers-by, rouse themselves from their lethargy to smile back in sympathy, and pass on their way wafting mental messages of affection.—“What a *dear* girl!” they cry, or “woman,” or “man,” as the case may be. “What a charming face! I should like to know that girl.” And the girl with the happy face goes on *her* way, all the happier for the kindly, thoughts by which she is pursued.

When strangers were first introduced to Pixie O'Shaughnessy they invariably catalogued her as a plain-looking girl; when they had known her for an hour they began to feel that they had been mistaken, and at the end of a week they would have been prepared to quarrel with their best friend if he had echoed their own first judgment. The charm of her personality soon overpowered the physical deficiency.

Stanor Vaughan was as yet too young and prosperous to realise the real reason of Pixie's attraction. He decided that it was attributable to her trim, jaunty little figure and the unusual fashion in which she dressed her hair. Also she wore a shade of bright flame-coloured silk which made a special appeal to his artistic eye, and he approved of the simple, graceful fashion of its cut.

“Looks as if she'd had enough stuff!” he said to himself, with all a man's dislike of the prevailing hobble. He pondered how to open the conversation, asking himself uneasily what punishment the girl would award him for his *faux pas* of the afternoon. Would she be haughty? She didn't look the kind of little thing to be haughty! Would she be cold and aloof? Somehow, glancing at the irregular, piquant little profile, he could not imagine her aloof. Would she snap? Ah! Now he was not so certain. He saw distinct possibilities of snap, and then, just as he determined that he really must make the plunge and

get it over, Pixie leaned confidentially toward him and said below her breath—

"*Please* talk! Make a start—any start—and I'll go on. ... It's your place to begin."

"Er—er—" stammered Stanor, and promptly forgot every subject of conversation under the sun. He stared back into the girl's face, met her honest eyes, and was seized with an impulse of confession. "Before I say anything else, I—I ought to apologise, Miss O'Shaughnessy. I'm most abominably ashamed. I'm afraid you overheard my—er—er—w—what I said to Miss Ward at tea—"

"Of course I heard," said Pixie, staring. "What could you expect? Not four yards away, and a great bass voice! I'm not *deaf*. But there's no need to feel sorry. I thought you put it very nicely, myself!"

"Nicely!" He stared in amaze. "*Nicely*! How could you possibly—"

"You said I had given Esmeralda my share. I'd never once looked at it in that way; neither had any one else. And it's so *soothing*. It gives me a sort of credit, don't you see, as well as a pride."

She was speaking honestly, transparently honestly; it was impossible to doubt that, with her clear eyes beaming upon him, her lips curling back in laughter from her small white teeth. There was not one sign of rancour, of offence, of natural girlish vanity suffering beneath a blow.

"Good sport!" cried Stanor, in a voice, however, which could be heard by no one but himself. His embarrassment fell from him, but not his amazement; *that* seemed to increase with each moment that passed. His glance lingered on Pixie's face, the while he said incredulously—

"It's—it's wonderful of you. I've known heaps of girls, but never one who would have taken it like that. You don't seem to have a scrap of conceit—"

"Ex-cuse me," corrected Miss O'Shaughnessy. For the first time she seemed to be slightly ruffled, as though the supposition that she could be bereft of any quality, or experience common to her kind was distinctly hurtful to her pride. "I *have*! Heaps! But it's for the right things. I've too much conceit to be conceited about

things about which I've no *right* to be conceited. I'm only conceited about things about which I'm—"

"Conceited enough to know are worth being jolly well conceited about," concluded Stanor, and they laughed together in merry understanding.

"That's it," agreed Pixie, nodding. "I used to be conceited about being plain, because it was so unusual in our family that it was considered quite distinguished, and my father used to boast at the hunt that he had the ugliest child in the county, though it was himself that said it. But," she gave the slightest, most ephemeral of sighs, "I've lived through that. I'm conceited now about—other things."

"Lots of them, I'm sure. There must be lots," agreed Stanor, with a sincerity which condoned the banality of the speech. "About your good nature for one thing, I should say, and your generosity in forgiving a blundering man, and your jolly disposition which makes you smile when another girl would have been wild. I can understand all those and a lot more, but, just as a matter of curiosity, I should like to know what are you conceited about *most*?"

Pixie O'Shaughnessy smiled. There was evidently no doubt in her own mind as to her reply. The slim figure straightened, the little head tilted in air. Quick and crisp came the reply—

"I can make people do what I like!"

"Can you, though!" exclaimed Stanor blankly. The statement seemed to threaten a mysteriously personal application, and he relapsed into a ruminating silence, the while his companion employed herself cheerfully with her dinner and the looks and conversation of her companions.

It was one of Pixie's special gifts to be able to do at least three things at the same time with quite a fair amount of success. She could, for instance, write a business-like letter while carrying on an animated conversation with a friend, and keeping an eye on a small child tottering around the room. Brain, eyes, and limb were alike so alert that what to slower natures would have been impossible, to her involved no effort at all.

Therefore, when about two minutes later Stanor opened his lips again to utter a short, urgent "*How?*" she had not the slightest difficulty in switching back to the subject, though she had been

at the moment in the midst of an absorbing calculation as to the number of yards of lace on a dress of a lady farther down the table, and in drawing mental designs of the way it was put on, to enclose to Bridgie in her next letter home.

"How?"

"I *understand* them," said Pixie deeply. "You can open any door if you have the key, but most people go on banging when it's shut. I wait till I find my key, and then I keep it ready until the moment arrives when I wish to get in."

Stanor's broad shoulders gave an involuntary movement which might almost have been taken for a shiver. Once again he felt a mysterious conviction of a personal application. All his life long the phrase had rung in his ears, "I don't understand you!" "If I could once understand you!" and for lack of that understanding there had been trouble and coldness between himself and his nearest relative. Proverbially he was difficult to understand; and he had prided himself on the reputation. Who wanted to be a simple, transparent fellow, whom any one could lead? This was the first time in his life that he had come into contact with a girl who announced herself an expert understander of human nature. He wondered vaguely what, given the initial success, Pixie would wish him to do, hesitated on the point of inquiry, thought better of it and turned the conversation to impersonal topics.

After dinner Pixie sat on a sofa in the drawing-room enjoying a temporary *tête-à-tête* with the other girl visitor. Miss Ward's hair was, if possible, smoother than ever, and she wore a velvet dress almost exactly matching it in shade, which seemed to Pixie's unsophisticated eyes an extraordinarily sumptuous garment for a young girl to wear. Her eyes were brown, too—bright, quick-glancing eyes full of interest and curiosity. When she spoke her nationality became once more conspicuous.

"Miss Pat-ricia O'Shaughnessy, I guess you and I have got to be real good friends! I've been spoiling for another girl to enjoy this trip with me. If you're having a good time, it makes it twice as good to have a girl to go shares, and compare notes, and share the jokes. You look to me as if you could enjoy a joke."

"I was brought up to them," Pixie affirmed. "I couldn't live without. There's nothing to eat, nor to drink, nor to do, nor to have that I couldn't give up at a pinch, but a sense of humour I—must have! If you feel the same, we're friends from this

minute. ... Would you mind telling me as a start just exactly who you are?"

Miss Ward's face fell. Her white brows knitted in a frown.

"I'm an Amurrican," she announced. "Mr and Mrs Hilliard had an introduction to my people when they visited the States, and when I came over to Europe they invited me here. I'm proud to death of being an Amurrican; that's of course! But there's something else. You might as well know it first as last." She straightened herself and drew a fluttering breath. "I'm in trade! I'm Ward's Unrivalled Piquant Pickles!"

"Wh-what?" Pixie stammered in confusion, as well she might, for the announcement was unusual, to say the least of it.

"Pickles! Cauliflower, and cabbage, and little snippets of vegetables floating in piquant sauce, in fat, square bottles. I make them in my factory. If you went over to the States you'd see my placards on every wall, and inside magazines, and on the back sheets of newspapers—a big, fat man eating a plate of cold meat with Ward's unrivalled piquants by his side. They used to be my father's: now they're mine. *I* am the Unrivalled Piquant Pickles. I run the factory. The profits grow more enormous every year. There's no other partners in it, only Me!"

If at the beginning of her speech the speaker had made an affectation of humility, she certainly ended on a note of pride, and Pixie's admiration was transparently evident.

"Think of that now! A whole factory, and pickles, too! I adore pickles, especially the fat, cauliflowery bits. And to see one's own name on the hoardings! I'd be so proud!"

"Honest Injun, you would? You don't feel proud and lofty because I'm in trade, and had a grandfather who couldn't read, while *your* ancestors have been grandees for centuries? Many English people *do*, you know. They have a way of looking at me as if I were a hundred miles away, and stunted at that. And others who *do* receive me don't trouble to hide that it's for the sake of the dollars. A girl likes to be cared for for *herself*: she wants people should judge her by what she *is*. It's a big handicap, Pat-ricia, to be too rich."

"I'll take your word for it, me dear, having no experience," said Pixie graciously; "but I'd like to be tried. As for caring—no one could help it. I do already, and I've only known you three hours,

and Esmeralda said you were nice enough to be Irish, and it isn't the easiest thing in the world to please *her* fancy."

"She's a beautiful princess. She's been real sweet to me over here. I'm crazy about her!" Honor affirmed in the slow, dragging voice which went so quaintly with her exaggerated language. "But one Mrs Hilliard don't make a world. You've got to be just as good to me as you know how, Pat-ricia, for I've got no one belonging to me on this side nearer than an elderly cousin, twice removed, and it's a lonesome feeling.

"You see, it isn't only what people think of *me*, it's the mean, suspicious feelings I've gotten towards *them*, as the result of being brought up an heiress. If I could tell you all I've endoored! The things I've been told! The things I've overheard! Twenty-three men have asked me to marry them, and there wasn't an honest heart among the crowd. I'm not a new-fashioned girl: I'm made so's I'd love my own home; but sure as fate I'll die an old maid, for *I* run away from fortune-hunters, and the honest men run away from me. If a man happened to be poor and proud, it would be a pretty stiff undertaking to propose to the biggest pickle factory in the world, and I guess I don't make it any easier. You see it's like this: the more I'm anxious that—that, er—er," she stammered uncertainly for a moment, then with forcible emphasis brought out a plural pronoun, "*they* should care for me really and truly for *myself*, the more I think that they only think—"

"Exactly!" interrupted Pixie, nodding. "I quite understand." And indeed she looked so exceedingly alert and understanding that Honor flushed all over her small, pale face, and made haste to change the conversation.

"How did you get on with your partner at dinner? Pretty well, eh? He can be real charming when he likes, and there's no doubt but he's good to look at. I've met him quite a good deal since I've been over here, for he's been staying at several houses at the same time. From a European point of view, we seem quite old friends, and I've a kind of fellow-feeling for him, poor boy, for he's a sufferer from my complaint of being too well off for his own good."

Pixie nodded several times without speaking, her lips pursed in knowing, elderly fashion.

"That accounts for it," she said, and when Honor queried eagerly as to her meaning, her reply had a blighting insinuation.

"I'm accustomed to soldiers—men who can fight."

"That's not fair!" cried Honor sharply. She straightened herself and tilted her head at an aggressive angle. "That's not fair. I guess Stanor Vaughan and I have to go through our own military training, and it's a heap more complicated than marching round a barrack yard! We're bound to make our own weapons, and our enemies are the worst that's made—the sort that comes skulking along in the guise of friends. There aren't any bands playing, either, to cheer us along, and when we win there are no medals and honours, only maybe an aching heart!"

She drew herself up with a startled little laugh.

"Mussy! Listen to me sermonising.—I guess I'd better get back to facts as fast as I know how. ... When I said Stanor was *too* well off, I didn't mean money exactly, but things are too easy for him all round. He's handsome, and strong, and clever, and charming, and there's an uncle in the background who plays fairy godfather and plans out his life ahead, so that he has nothing to worry about like other young men. He's not an old uncle really: he's almost young, but he had an accident as a boy which laid him up for quite a spell, and turned him into a shy recluse. Then when at last he recovered, he was lame, so of course he was cut off from active life, and I guess from what I've heard that he's sensitive about it. Anyway, he lives all alone, and has adopted Stanor as a kind of son, and fusses over him like a hen with one chick—a bit more than the young man appreciates, I fancy."

"How fuss? In what way?"

"Oh! Ambitious, don't you know," Miss Ward explained vaguely. "All the things he ever wanted to be and to do, and couldn't, he is determined that Stanor shall do for him. He is clever, and studious, and serious, so he is set on it that the poor boy should be a book-worm, too, and put study before everything else, and have serious ideas on—er—er—the responsibility of property." Honor frowned at the tips of her small satin shoes. "Drains, you know, and cottages, and overcrowding the poor. Of course that kind of thing comes easy enough when you are thirty-five and lame, but poor Stanor is only twenty-four, and as handsome as paint. It's difficult to be serious-minded at twenty-four, and patient with people who fuss!"

Pixie knitted her brows with an air of perturbation.

"But I hope he is nice to his uncle. It would be so hard to be hurt in your body and hurt in your mind at the same time. It's bad enough for him, poor creature, to have to sit still and live his life through another. His heart is not crippled, nor his mind, nor his will, and fancy, me dear, going on being patient, day after day, year after year, while your body held you back, and you longed, and couldn't, and felt the spirit to move a mountain, and were obliged to lie still on a sofa!" Pixie bounced in a characteristic fashion on her own sofa corner, and whisked a minute pocket-handkerchief to her eyes. "Excuse me, me dear, will you change the conversation? I was always soft-hearted, but red eyes at a dinner party are not *à la mode*. ... Let's talk about pickles!—"

Chapter Seven.

Pixie is Dull.

Geoffrey Hilliard and his two guests entered the drawing-room, and Pixie's eyes turned to greet them with a smile. She was longing to talk to each one of them in turns, and with her usual complacency was assured that each would reciprocate the wish. But the next moment brought with it a jar, for Geoffrey crossed the room to join his wife, and the two younger men made a bee-line for the chair by the *other* side of the sofa, whereon Honor sat ensconced!

It was only a minute, less than a minute, before Stanor had established a lead, and Mr Carr's deviation to the left was a triumph of smiling composure; nevertheless, Pixie's sharp eyes had seen and understood, and her heart felt a natural girlish pang. At twenty it is hard to accept with resignation the part of second fiddle, and Pixie's generosity had its limits—as whose has not? She had looked at Honor's pretty face and costly gown, had heard of her wealth and independence with the purest and most ungrudging pleasure, but when it became a case of superior popularity, that was a very different matter! Positively, it was quite an effort to twist her lips into a smile to greet Mr Carr, and it made matters no better to perceive the artificiality of his response.

He was a man several years older than the handsome Stanor, and his type of face was so essentially legal that his profession as barrister could be guessed even before it was known. His chin was the most pronounced feature of the face—it was really

interesting to discover just how assertive a chin could be. It was a prominent, deeply indented specimen, which ascribed to itself so much power of expression that even the eyes themselves played a secondary part. The tilt of it, the droop of it, the aggressive tilt forward were each equally eloquent, and, one felt sure, must make equal appeal to a British jury.

At this moment, however, there was no jury at hand—only Pixie O'Shaughnessy, feeling very small and snubbed in her corner of the sofa, and robbed for the moment of her accustomed aplomb by the blighting consciousness that she was not wanted.

Robert Carr's chin was leaning very dejectedly forward; he would have voted his companion a tongue-tied little bore if Stanor Vaughan had not taken the opportunity of a moment when his host was absent from the dining-room to recount her "sporting" forgiveness of his own *faux pas*.

"That's the right sort. I like that girl!" had been Robert's reply, and the good impression was strong enough to withstand a fair amount of discouragement.

So he discoursed to Pixie on the subject of pictures, of which she knew nothing; and she switched the conversation round to music, of which he knew less; and she cast furtive glances of longing towards the other couple, who were laughing and chattering together with every appearance of enjoyment, and he kept his eyes rigorously averted, while his chin drooped ever lower and lower in growing depression. Later on the whole party played several rather foolish games, of which Pixie had never heard before, and in which she consequently did not shine, which was still another depressing circumstance to add to the list.

When Esmeralda escorted her sister upstairs to bed she said blightingly, "You were very dull to-night, Pixie. Were you shy, by any chance? *Please* don't be shy; it's such poor form!" which was not the most soothing night-cap in the world for a young woman who had privately made up her mind to take society by storm. Not since the first night in the dormitory at Holly House had Pixie felt so lone and lorn as she did when the door was shut, and she was left alone in the big, luxurious bedroom. She stood before a swing mirror, gazing at her own reflection, contrasting it with those of Esmeralda and Honor, and reflecting on her sister's parting words.

"This," said she to herself, with melancholy resignation—"this is the sort of discipline that is good for the young! At this rate I'll

grow so chastened that they won't recognise me when I go home." For a whole, minute she stood mute and motionless, pondering over the prospect; then the light danced back into her eyes, she shrugged her shoulders, and composedly began her undressing.

The next day broke bright and warm, and after a leisurely breakfast the four visitors strolled about for an hour, looking at the dogs and horses and playing with the two small boys, who were making all the mischief they could on the cedar lawn, while their French nurse looked on with sympathetic enjoyment.

Marie was quite a character in the household, and was admitted to a degree of intimacy rarely accorded to an English domestic. She was that somewhat unusual combination, a Parisian Protestant, but in other respects remained one of the most typically French creatures who was ever born. Meet her in any quarter of the world, in any nation, in any garb, and for no fraction of a moment could the beholder doubt her nationality. She was French in appearance, in expression, in movement, in thought, in character, and in deed; lovable, intelligent, vivacious, easily irritated, but still more easily pleased, sharp of tongue, tender of heart, and full to overflowing with humour. In appearance Marie was small and slight, with a sallow complexion which was the bane of her life, black hair and beautiful white teeth. No one could call her handsome, but she had certainly an attraction of her own.

This morning Pixie arrived upon the scene in time to overhear a typical conversation between the nurse and her two charges. Geoff, the elder of the two brothers, a handsome, imperious youngster, having overheard a chance remark as to his own likeness to his mother, was engaged in a rigorous cross-questioning of Marie, on the subject.

"Marie, am I beautiful?"

"Leetle boys are not beautiful. It is enough when they are good."

"My mother is beautiful. Mr Carr says I am like my mother."

"Ugly people can be like beautiful people. How can a dirty little boy be like a *belle grande dame*? Regard thy hands! Four times already have they been scrubbed."

"My hands can be clean when I like. I was talking of if I was beautiful."

"Silence, miserable one! The appearance is of no account," pronounced Marie boldly. "To be good is better than beauty."

Geoffrey drew his brows together in a frown. He was displeased, and when he was displeased he made himself felt.

"I should fink, Marie," he said deliberately, "that you must be the goodest person in all the world."

The inference was plain, so plain that sensitive little Jack coloured up to the roots of his hair. Jack was the sweetest and most lovable of children—a flaxen-haired cherub, whose winning face and gentle ways made him universally beloved. Among the children of the second generation he stood out pre-eminently, and every one of his aunts and uncles enshrined him in a special niche of affection. Pixie had known many searchings of heart because of her own partiality, but was fain to console herself by the thought that Jack was even more like the beloved Bridgie than Bridgie's own sturdy, commonplace son.

As for Jack, he loved everybody, Marie among the number, and, feeling her depreciated, rushed stutteringly to the rescue.

"Oh, Geoff!" he cried eagerly. "You souldn't! You souldn't, Geoff! I know somefing that's uglier than Marie—"

Geoff's scowl deepened. He might insinuate, but a barefaced putting into words outraged his feelings. His eyes sent out flashes of lightning at the innocent little blunderer, but Marie's eyes shone; her face was one beam of tender amusement.

"What then, *chérie*? Tell thy Marie!"

"M-monkeys!" lisped Jack.

The roar of derision which greeted this consolatory statement brought the startled tears into Jack's eyes, but Marie's arms wrapped round him, and her voice cooed in his ear.

"Little pigeon! little cabbage! Weep not, my darling! Marie does not laugh. Marie understands. It is true! The monkeys are more ugly than I."

Pixie turned, to find Esmeralda standing beside her, her brows frowning, while her lips smiled. She put her hand through her sister's arm and drew her away.

"Leave them alone; Marie manages them best. Poor, weeny Jack! He meant so well!" She drew a long sigh. "Those two boys are just a newer edition of their parents. Little Jack is Geoffrey over again—just the same kind, patient, sensitive disposition; and Geoff is me. When he is in one of his moods it's like looking at myself in a mental glass. I'm furious with him for showing me how hateful I can be, and at the same time I understand what he is feeling so well that my heart nearly breaks with sympathy. It's terrible to feel that one is showing a bad example to one's own child, when one cares so much that at any moment one would be willingly flayed alive to do him good!"

"Improve your example, me dear—wouldn't that be simpler!" cried Pixie, with an air of breezy common sense which was in startling contrast to the other's tragic fervour.

There was a time for everything, Pixie reflected, and it did *not* seem a judicious moment for a hostess to indulge in heroics, what time the members of her house-party were advancing to meet her with faces wreathed in expectancy. They made a goodly picture in the spring sunshine—the little trim girl and the two tall men attired in the easy country kit which is so becoming to the Anglo-Saxon type. The young hostess looked at them and gave a start of recollection.

"Oh, of course! I was forgetting. ... We have been arranging a picnic. Geoff has ordered the big car for eleven. He is to drive us a twenty-mile spin to the beginning of Frame Woods. The chauffeur will go on by train and meet us there, to take the car round by the high-road and meet us a few miles farther on with the hampers. The woods are carpeted with primroses just now, so we shall enjoy the walk, and it will give us an appetite for lunch."

Pixie gave a little prance of jubilation.

"Lovely! Lovely! I adore picnics! We'll gather, sticks to boil a kettle, to make tea, and boil eggs, like we used to do at home when any one had a birthday. And the sticks always fell in, and the water got smoked!"

Honor and the two men had joined the sisters by this time, and stood looking on with amusement.

"Miss O'Shaughnessy seems to appreciate smoked tea," said Stanor, and Pixie sturdily defended her position.

"I don't; it's hateful! But you can have *nice* tea every day, of your life, and the game *is* worth the candle! You can always pour it away and drink milk, and you've had all the fun—gathering the wood, and stoking, and looking at the smoke, and the blaze, and hearing the crackle, and smelling the dear, *woody* smell—"

"And blacking your hands, and spoiling your temper, and waiting for—how many hours does it take for a watched kettle to boil?—and in the end throwing away the result! You're easily pleased, Miss O'Shaughnessy!"

"I *am*, praise be!" assented Pixie, with a fervour which brought four pairs of eyes upon her with a mingling of interest and admiration.

So far as features were concerned, it was a plain little face on which they gazed; yet no one could have called it plain at that moment, for, it was irradiated by that rarest of all beauties, an expression of radiant contentment. In comparison with that face those of the beholders appeared tired and discouraged, old before their time, by reason of drooping lips, puckered brows, and wrinkled foreheads; and it was evident that they themselves were aware of the fact, and stood, as it were, as amateurs before a master. Robert Carr poked forward his chin, and stared at her between narrowed eyes. Handsome Stanor smiled approval, Honor slipped a little hand through her arm, and Esmeralda sighed and frowned, and said with a shrug—

"Oh, we've lived past that, Pixie! Nowadays we take thermos bottles, and luncheon baskets, and hot-water dishes, and dine just as—uninterestingly as we do at home! English people wouldn't thank you for a scramble. You must wait until you go back to Knock to Jack and Sylvia, and even there the infection is creeping. Jack is developing quite a taste for luxury."

"I like it myself. Dear Mrs Hilliard, please let us have luxuries to-day!" Stanor pleaded; and Joan turned back to the house to superintend arrangements, while the four young people sauntered slowly about the grounds. Honor's hand still rested on Pixie's arm, and her voice had a wistful tone as she said—

"I'd like to fix a picnic *your* way some time, Pat-ricia! It would be a heap more fun. It must be fine to be a large family and make believe together. It's a problem for an only child to make mischief all by itself. ... Did you have real good times in that old castle with the funny name?"

"We did!" affirmed Pixie eloquently. "There were so many of us, and so little to go round, that we were kept busy contriving and scheming the whole time, and, when *that* failed, falling back on imagination to fill in the gaps. It's more comfortable to be rich, but it's not half so exciting. When you have very few things, and wait an age for them, it's thrilling beyond words when they *do* arrive. When Bridgie re-covered the cushions in the drawing-room we all came to call in a string, and sat about on chairs, discussing the weather and studying the colour effects from different angles. Then we turned on the light and pretended to be a party. I suppose Esmeralda never *notices* a cushion!"

Pixie sighed, and Honor stared, and Robert Carr looked from one to the other, his thin lips twitching in sarcastic fashion.

Chapter Eight.

A Long, Long Letter.

From Pixie O'Shaughnessy to Bridgie Victor:

"Not a moment have I had to write to you, Honey, since the first wee note, and I've been here a whole three days. It's the most distracting thing in the world when you've nothing to do, and takes up more time than you'd believe. I think of you all in the morning in the dear little house, every one bustling round, and only longing for more hands and legs to get along the quicker, while here we sit, the six of us, dawdling over breakfast, with not a thing to think of but how to waste the time until we can decently begin to eat again! It isn't energetic, and it isn't useful, and it isn't wise, or noble, or improving, or anything of the kind, but I won't disguise from you, my dear, that, by way of a change, it's exceedingly agreeable to the feelings.

"In Esmeralda's language, there is no one here at present, which means that there are three other visitors besides my important self, and, what is more, my dear, there's a full-fledged romance being acted under my very eyes. Here's luck! Aren't things kind to happen so conveniently for me?

"Heroine. Honor Ward, aged twenty-four. Orphan. Proprietress of Piquant Pickles Factory, Cheeving, Massachusetts, USA. Honor, who is of fair and pleasing exterior, is spending a year in Europe

visiting various friends and connections. Honor is sensitive as to her enormous fortune, and suspects:—

"*Robert Carr, Hero in Chief*, of being attracted thereby. Robert Carr is a barrister engaged in climbing the ladder. He loves Honor, but resents her attitude, and talks assiduously to:—

"*Patricia O'Shaughnessy*, youngest scion of the house. Patricia is plain, but fascinating, and of noble disposition. She is anxious to reconcile the lovers. The more so as she herself prefers the companionship of:—

"*Stanor Vaughan, Secondary Hero*, a beauteous youth of fair estate. Stanor being ardently in love with himself, does not return her passion. He treats her with sisterly affection. Patricia hides her chagrin beneath a mask of gaiety.

"How's that for a start, Honey? Pretty thrilling, eh? Don't be anxious about the mask! It's so life-like that it deceives even myself into believing that it's the genuine article, but when dramatic happenings are around, it isn't Pixie O'Shaughnessy who will stand aside and take no part!

"On Wednesday we went for a picnic. It was meant to be a picnic *de luxe*, but fate was kind to us, and it turned out very alfresco indeed. We started in the big car, Geoffrey driving, and all sorts of good things piled up in hampers, and at an appointed place the chauffeur met us and took possession, while we walked on through the woods. Such woods, Bridgie; all sweet, and dim, and green, the trunks of the great old beeches standing up straight and tall like the pillars of a great cathedral, and sweet, innocent little primroses peeping up through the moss, and last year's leaves crackling under foot. Those primroses went straight to my head; I felt quite fey.

"Strictly, between me and your sisterly ear, I was *very amusing indeed*, and they all appreciated me very much! And we laughed and talked, and finally began to sing.

"'You have a quite too beautiful voice, Miss O'Shaughnessy. Won't you sing to us in the drawing-room to-night?'

"How sweet of you! Really, I shall be *too* charmed!" (This is the orthodox fashionable manner of speaking. Let us be fashionable or die!)

"We sang glees. Esmeralda and I took contralto; there was practically no treble, for Honor's squeak was drowned fathoms deep; Geoffrey and Mr Carr droned bass, and Stanor Vaughan took tenor, rather out of tune it's true, but no man with that profile could be expected to condescend to *bass*! We sang 'Come and see the daylight dawning, on the meadow far away,' and Mr Carr said he must really make a point of going some day, and we've planned an early walk for next week, if any one can wake up in time. We roared 'All among the barley,' until the primroses looked quite abashed, and turned into 'Good-night, good-night beloved,' to soothe them down again, and we grew so intimate and festive, and they all said, 'What next, Miss O'Shaughnessy, what next?' Really, my dear, I was a *succès fou*.

"But more is yet to come. It was so lovely and we were enjoying ourselves so much, that we dallied about, and took extra little *détours*, so that it was nearly two o'clock when we arrived at the appointed spot, and imagine, my dear, our thwarted hunger and thirst, when not a vestige of a car could we behold! It was no use *waiting*, because if all had gone right it should have been waiting for us for an hour at least. So we held a council of war at the side of the road.

"*Esmeralda*. 'I shall give Dawson notice *At Once*! He has made some stupid mistake, and gone to the wrong place. I've no patience with blunderers.' (She hasn't.)

"*Geoffrey*. 'Something may have gone wrong with the car. Don't blame the poor fellow till you are sure he deserves it.'

"*Stanor*. 'I don't care one rap about Dawson. I want my lunch! *With* the luxuries! What price expectation *now*, Miss O'Shaughnessy?'

"*Honor*. 'I'm sorry to be disagreeable, but I've a blister on my heel. If it's a case of walking back, I must bid you all a fond adieu and take to a forest life.'

"*Robert Carr*. 'What can you expect if you start out on a country walk in ball-room slippers?'

"Honor said: 'They aren't, and, anyway, I don't expect sympathy from *you*,' and I said: 'Isn't there an opening into the road a little nearer the village where the car may be waiting all the time?'

"Mrs Dick,' quoted Geoffrey,—'your common sense is invaluable!' and off he started in advance while we all trailed in the rear, along the dusty high-road this time, and not by any means in a singing mood. Esmeralda stalked, and Honor limped. She hadn't done it a bit before, so it came on rather suddenly, and Stanor offered her his arm, and she hung upon it, and Mr Carr talked politics to me, and I tried to quote Dick's remarks and appear intelligent, but it didn't come off.

"It was a mile, and more. It seemed like three, and when we arrived at the opening the car was not there. We sat down against the dusty hedgerow and gave way to despair. Here we were stranded five weary miles from our base, i.e. the hampers, and what were we going to do? Every one had a different suggestion, but the object of them all was the same—*get something to eat*. It's humiliating how greedy people become when they are defrauded of a meal! Dawson and the car were forgotten, everything was forgotten, and when I said that doctors were agreed that we ate too much, and an occasional starve was the most healthy thing that could happen, they looked coldly on me, and Stanor said doctors might keep their theories, but give him *foie gras*! Finally we agreed to be scouts and go forth on a foraging expedition through the tiny village, seeking what we might devour. Geoffrey was the scout-master, and we were to meet him at the second lamp-post and report.

"There were half a dozen cottages, one shop, and a yard where they sold coal and fresh eggs. So that meant a cottage each, and the stores thrown in. Our orders were to knock on each door and stand close so as to have a good view of the interior when it was opened. If it was a dirty interior we were to dissemble, and ask the way; if it was clean, we were to say, 'Oh, if you please, we are stranded motorists, and do you supply plain teas?' In case of *two* being clean, the choice was to be left with the scout-master, who would decide between them with tact and discretion.

"Bridgie, it *was* sport! They were *all* clean, and they *all* supplied plain teas, but the astounding part was that no one could supply milk! (Esmeralda says she has never yet raided an English cottage where they *could*.) And they all offered the same bill of fare—tea with tinned milk, eggs, and spring onions! We chose the biggest and airiest cottage, ordered eggs, looked haughtily

at onions, adjourned to the village store and tried to discover some accessories among the rope, firewood, and linoleum. There was tinned salmon, but Esmeralda said she objected to us dying on her hands, and loaf sugar, and treacle, and bull's-eyes in a glass bottle, and gingerbread biscuits (but the snap had departed, and they were so soft that you could have rolled them in balls), and some very strong-looking cheese, and rows of dried herrings packed in a box.

"It was Hobson's choice, so we bought a herring apiece, and insisted on having each one wrapped up in paper, and carrying it across the road in our own separate hands, and *I* bought a pound of bull's-eyes. They are such encouraging things on a long walk!

"It was a *delicious* tea. The milk was rather greasy and hard to mix, but if you didn't think about it, it tasted almost as good as real, the eggs were fresh, and the herrings so good that Stanor ran across the road for more, and we made time with bread and butter until they were cooked. And we gave not a thought to the motor; it was only when the sixth plate of bread and butter had been eaten to a crumb that we remembered the miles between us and the nearest station. Five or six it was, nothing to trouble ordinary people, even if they would have preferred a comfortable car, but there was Honor! She had slipped off her shoe under the table, and when she tried to put it on again it hurt so badly that she could hardly hobble across the room, and there was not a vehicle within miles.

"We all fussed and wondered what could be done, except Mr Carr, who strolled calmly out of the house without a word, lighting a cigarette as he went, and after that Honor's foot got so suddenly worse that the tears came to her eyes. Five minutes later when we were still fussing and settling nothing, back he came, and in his hands, what do you think?—you'd never guess—a pair of men's carpet slippers! I remember in a dim, sub-conscious fashion having seen them hanging up in drab and crimson bunches from the ceiling of the shop, but it had never occurred to me that they were to *wear!*"

"'You can walk in these!' said Mr Carr coolly, and without waiting to hear Honor's reply, he went down on his knees, and began unbuttoning her shoe. She has the daintiest mite of a foot you ever saw—it looked like a doll's in his big, strong hand—but she wasn't a bit grateful. There was a look on her face which sent all the others crowding to the door, but she glared at me to stay, and, being curious, I obeyed.

"‘Mr Carr,’ says she,—‘this is too much! It is usual in my country for a man to ask a girl what she wants, before he takes it upon himself to dictate!’

"He went on unfastening the shoe.

"Occasionally one meets people who don’t know what they *do* want!

"‘Well, I reckon I *do*. And it don’t happen to be carpet slippers. I’d look a guy. What are you taking off that shoe for anyway? That foot’s all right!’

"‘It wouldn’t be right long. One flat shoe and one French heel make a poor pair. You are going to wear both.’

"‘They’re miles too large. They’d fall off on the road.’

"‘Oh, no they won’t. I’ll take care of that,’ he said coolly, and took from his pocket two strong black bootlaces which he proceeded to criss-cross over the instep and round the ankles. She sat quite still watching him, her eyes very bright, her hands twisted together on her lap. When he had finished she put out her feet and stared at them—they *did* look boats!—then she looked down at him. He was still kneeling, and there was not a sound to be heard in that kitchen but the tick of the old clock and the beat, beat, beat of Pixie O’Shaughnessy’s heart.

"‘Don’t you care,’ said she softly, ‘a mite *how*—I—look?’

"‘Not a mite,’ says he coolly. ‘I care how you *feel*!’

"There was a look in his eyes which was not carpet slippers, far from it, and Honor leaped up and swept to the door with what was intended to be a haughty ‘sweep,’ but the slippers pad-padded at each step in a sort of shuffle, which was the unhaughtiest thing you could possibly imagine. Then Mr Carr gathered up the two tiny brown shoes and dusted them carefully with his handkerchief, and slipped one into each pocket of his Norfolk coat. Honor never bothered about her shoes: I suppose you don’t when you own factories, but Mr Carr walked all the way with his hands in his pockets as if he had got something there that he liked to hold.

"The children of the village followed us as we went, and called out, ‘Hi, look at her feet! Hi, Miss, is there room for me in them slippers?’ as of course they would, bless them! And I will say for her she took it smiling.

"Two miles along the road the car met us, poor Dawson apoplectic with distress and confusion. The engine had gone wrong, and he had had a terrible time getting it put right, and was distracted because he could find no way of sending on the hampers. We tumbled in and whirled home in peace and safety, but some of us were glad it had not come before.

"Don't you wonder how I've accomplished this mammoth letter? There are so many times a day in this house when one has to dress in something different, to do the next thing on the programme, and experience has proved that I change in about a quarter the time taken by the others, so down I sit and fill up the wait by scribbling a page or two more, and I hope, my dear, the result will amuse you.

"I wear my best clothes all day long, eat indigestible food, go to bed late, get up later, and have Esmeralda's maid to do my hair. You'd think it would need an effort to change into a fine lady all at once, but it doesn't; you just slip in, and feel like a sleek, stroked cat. My dear, I was born to be a Society Belle!

"Pixie."

Chapter Nine.

A Rift.

"Let me break it to you tenderly," said Mrs Hilliard to her guests at breakfast on the morning after the picnic, "that on Thursday there is a bazaar, and that it's no use any of you making plans for that day or the morning before. The real reason why I invited you all just at this particular time is that you might assist, and be bright and pleasant and make my stall a success."

She smiled beguilingly as she spoke, and no one could be more beguiling than Joan when it suited her own purpose. But her blandishments failed to propitiate her hearers, who one and all laid down knives and forks and fell back in their seats in attitudes expressive of dismay.

"A bazaar. *Assist*? What bazaar? Where? What for? This is too sudden! Why were we not warned?"

Joan twinkled mischievously.

"I was afraid you would run away. People are so surly about bazaars. It's in the village; for a parish nurse. She's new, and needs a cottage and furniture, and clothes and salary, and the money has to be found. I wanted Geoffrey to give it right out, it's so much simpler, but he wouldn't. He thought it was right that other people should help."

Geoffrey Hilliard said nothing. It was true that he thought it a wrong attitude for a whole parish to depend upon the gifts of one rich man, but an even stronger reason had been his desire to induce his wife to take some active interest in her poorer neighbours and to occupy herself on their behalf. When Joan had unwillingly consented to take the principal stall at the bazaar, he had complacently expected a succession of committee meetings and sewing-bees, which would make a wholesome interest in a life spent too entirely in self-gratification; but the weeks had passed by, and the bazaar was at hand, and so far he had observed no symptoms of work on its behalf.

He sat silently, waiting to glean information through the questioning of his guests.

"I've taken part in bazaars before now. I'm an expert at bazaars. Bridgie has had part of a stall several times for things for the regiment; but *where is your work?*" demanded Pixie sternly. "When you take part in a bazaar it means every room crowded out with cushions and tidies, and mats and pincushions, and sitting up at nights, finishing off and sewing on prices, and days of packing up at the end, to say nothing of circulars and invitations, and your own aprons and caps. I haven't noticed a bit of fuss. How *can* you be going to have a bazaar without any fuss?"

She looked so accusingly at her sister as she spoke that the others laughed, but there was a hint of uneasiness in the manner in which Joan glanced at her husband before replying.

"There isn't any. Why should there be? Fancy work isn't my *forte*, and it would bore me to sobs *living* bazaar for months ahead. I've sent money to order ready-mades, and there are a pile of packing-cases stored away upstairs which will provide more than we want. They *ought* to do, considering the money I've spent! I expect the things will be all right."

"Haven't you *looked?*" cried Pixie blankly, while Geoffrey flushed, shrugged his shoulders, and muttered a sarcastic

"Charity made easy!" which brought an answering flash into his wife's eyes.

"Is there anything particularly estimable in upsetting a whole house and wasting time in manufacturing fal-lals which nobody needs? I fail to see it," she retorted sharply, and Geoffrey shrugged again, his face grim and displeased.

It was not a pleasant moment for the listeners, and one and all were grateful to Stanor Vaughan for the easy volubility, with which he dashed to the rescue.

"I'll open the cases for you, Mrs Hilliard. I'm a nailer at opening cases; ought to have been a furniture remover by profession. Give me wood and nails, and a litter of straw and sawdust, and I'm in my element. Better take 'em down to the hall and unpack them there, I suppose? Safest plan with breakables. Jolly good crockery you get from abroad! I was at winter sports with my sister, and she fell in love with a green pottery cruse business, half a franc, and as big as your head. I argued with her for an hour, but it was no good, buy it she would, and cuddled it in her arms the whole way home! If you have any green cruses, Mrs Hilliard, I'll buy a dozen!"

Esmeralda thanked him, and proceeded to explain her arrangements in a manner elaborately composed. It appeared that she had displayed considerable ingenuity in the way of saving herself trouble.

"I sent instructions to each place that every article was to be marked in plain figures. We shall just have to translate them into English money and add on a little more. It's unnecessary to re-mark everything afresh. I've engaged a joiner to be at the hall ready to fix up any boards or shelves which we may need, and of course he'll unpack. There's not the slightest reason for any one else to break his nails; there will be enough work for us on the day."

"Are we to be dressed up in fancy character? It's all so sudden that I'd like to know the worst at once," sighed Honor plaintively. "I've been a Swiss maiden, and I've been a Dolly Varden, and I've been the Old Woman that lived in a Shoe, so I guess I can bear another turn of the screw. But I look real sweet in my new blue gown."

"Wear it, then, wear it. It's ridiculous dressing up in daylight in a village hall. Let every one wear what suits them best."

"Wait till you see my waistcoat!" cried Stanor, and they rose from the table laughing, and breakfast was at an end.

Pixie made straight for the nursery. She was jarred and troubled by the scene which had just taken place, all the more so as it was by no means the first occasion during her short visit when Geoffrey and Joan had unmistakably "jarred."

In the old days at Knock Castle Esmeralda's tantrums had been accepted as part of the daily life, but six years spent in the sunshine of Bridgie's home made a difference between husband and wife seem something abnormal and shocking. Imagine Dick sneering at Bridgie! Imagine Bridgie snapping back and relapsing into haughty indifference! The thing was preposterous, unthinkable! Could that be the reason of Esmeralda's unrest, that she and her husband had outgrown their love? Pixie felt it equally impossible at that moment to sit quietly alone, or to talk naturally to her fellow-guests, but experience had proved that the most absolutely certain method of getting out of herself was to court the society of children. So she shut herself in the nursery with the two small boys, who took every advantage of the unexpected treat without troubling their heads as to how it had come about.

Meantime the three guests started off on the usual morning peregrination of the grounds, and Joan followed her husband to his study, found him staring aimlessly out of the window, and accosted him in cold and biting tones.

"Geoffrey, I wish to speak to you. You are entitled to your own opinions, but the next time that you find them in opposition to mine I should be obliged if you would reserve your remarks until we are alone. If you have no consideration for me, you might at least consider your guests; it cannot be agreeable for them to overhear our differences."

Geoffrey did not move. He stood with his hands thrust deep into his pockets, his head drooping forward on his breast, an air of weariness and depression in every line of his figure. For a minute there was silence, then he spoke, slowly, and with frequent breaks, as though considering each word as it came—

"That is true.—I was to blame.—I should have waited, as you say.—It shall not occur again, Joan. I apologise."

Esmeralda looked at him. The fire died from her eyes, her lips trembled. Quick to anger, she was equally quick to penitence, and a soft word could melt her hardest mood. She made a very

lovely picture at that moment, but her husband's back was still turned. He kept his head rigorously turned aside as he crossed to his desk and seated himself on his swivel chair.

"I have ordered the car for eleven, as you wished."

"Thank you."

Joan knew herself to be dismissed, but she had no intention of obeying. For her impetuous nature half-measures did not exist, and a peace that was not peace with honour seemed unworthy the name. She leaned over her husband's desk, facing him with earnest eyes.

"Geoffrey! Why were you so cross? It was unreasonable. I shall do quite well at my stall. People are sick to death of cushions and cosies, but they will snap at my beautiful things from abroad, which they don't often have a chance of buying."

"I am sure of it."

"Then why—why—? What on earth put you into such a bait?"

Geoffrey put down his pen and drew a long sigh. It was easy to see that he dreaded a discussion, and was most unwillingly drawn into its toils.

"Since you ask me, Joan, I was disappointed that you had taken so little personal trouble over the affair. I could have given the money easily enough; when I refused I was thinking more of you than of any one else. I hoped this bazaar might be the means of taking you out of yourself, of bringing you in contact with people whose lives are not altogether given up to self-indulgence. Your one idea seems to have been to avoid such a course."

"You would have liked me to have sewing meetings here as Mrs Ewart has at the vicarage: plain sewing from two to four, and then tea and buns. You would have liked to see me sitting in the evening embroidering wild roses on tray cloths, and binding shaving-cases with blue ribbon?"

"I would," said Geoffrey sturdily. He did not smile, as he had been expected to do, but sat grim and grave, refusing to be cajoled.

Esmeralda's anger mounted once more.

"Then I call it stupid and bigoted, and I absolutely disagree. If I'm to waste my time, I'll waste it in my own way, not in perpetrating atrocities to disfigure another home. And I hate village sewing meetings and the dull, ugly frumps who go to them."

Mr Hilliard took up his pen, squared his elbows, and quietly began to write.

"Geoffrey, can't you answer when I speak to you! I'm not a child to be cowed and snubbed! I—I hate you when you get into this superior mood!"

Geoffrey lifted his face—was it the strong east light which made it suddenly appear so lined and worn? There was no anger in his face, only a very pitiful sadness.

"I am afraid there are many moods in which you 'hate' me, Esmeralda."

The look on his face, the sound of the old pet name were too much for the warm Irish heart. In a moment his wife was on her knees beside him, holding his hands, pressing them to her lips, stroking them with caressing fingers.

"Geoff, Geoff, it isn't true; you know it isn't. I always love you, I always did. You know it is true. I was ready to marry you when I thought you hadn't a penny. I wanted nothing but yourself."

"I never forget it," said Geoffrey deeply; "I never can. Sometimes—sometimes I wish it had been true, it might have been better for us both. 'All that riches can buy' has not made a happy woman of you, Esmeralda." He stroked back the hair from her broad, low brow, looking with troubled eyes at the fine lines which already marked its surface. "I can give my wife many treasures, but apparently not the thing she needs most of all—the happiness which Dick Victor manages to provide for Bridgie on a few hundreds a year!"

"Bridgie is Bridgie, and I'm myself; we were born different. It's not fair to compare us, and the advantages are not all on one side. If she has not had my opportunities, she has escaped the temptations; she might have grown selfish too. Sometimes I hate money, Geoffrey; it's a millstone round one's neck."

"No!" Geoffrey squared his shoulders. "It's a lever. I am glad to be rich; my father worked hard for his money—it was honourably gained, and I'm proud to inherit it. It is a

responsibility, a heavy one, if you like, but one is bound to have responsibilities in life, and it's a fine thing to have one which holds such possibilities. I mean to bring up the boys to take that view. But—" he paused heavily—"I'd give it up to-morrow if it could purchase peace and tranquillity, a rest from this everlasting strain!"

Something tightened over Joan's heart; a chill as of fear passed through her blood. Geoffrey spoke quietly, so sanely, with an unmistakable air of knowing his own mind. And his manner was so cool, so detached, not one lover-like word or action had he vouchsafed in answer to her own. A chill passed through Joan's veins, the chill of dismay which presages disaster. At that moment she divined the certainty of what she had never before even dimly imagined—the waning of her husband's love. Like too many beautiful young wives, she had taken for granted that her place in her husband's heart was established for life, independent of any effort to retain it. She had not realised that love is a treasure which must needs be guarded with jealous care, that the delicate cord may be strained so thin that a moment may come when it reaches breaking-point. That moment had not come yet; surely, surely, it could not have come, but she felt the shadow.

"Don't you love me any more, Geoffrey?" she asked faintly. "In spite of all my faults, do you love me still like you did?"

It was the inevitable ending to a dissension, the inevitable question which he had answered a hundred times, and if to-day there was a new tone in the voice which spoke it, Geoffrey was not sensitive enough to notice. Few men would mark such differences in a moment of tension.

"I love you, Joan," he answered wearily. "You are my wife; but you've rubbed off the bloom!"

Joan got up quietly from her knees and crossed to the door. The voice within declared that Geoffrey would call her back, that he would leap after her and clasp her in his arms, as he had done a score of times in like circumstances, that he would implore forgiveness for his cruel words. She walked slowly, pausing as she went to put a chair against the wall, to alter the position of a vase of flowers. She reached the door and cast a swift glance behind. Geoffrey had gone back to his writing; his pen travelled swiftly across the page; he did not raise his head.

Chapter Ten.

Pixie Gives Joan a Tonic.

A romp with the children restored Pixie's elastic spirits, and brought a revived wish for her friends' society. She leaned out of the window and beheld a game of tennis on in obvious need of a fourth player, waved gaily in response to a general beckoning, and tripped downstairs singing a glad refrain. And then, in the corridor outside her boudoir, behold a pale and tragic Esmeralda summoning her with a dramatic hand. Pixie flounced, and a quiver of indignation stiffened her small body. A whole hour of a lovely spring morning had already been spent in struggling to overcome the depression caused by the scene at breakfast, and here was Joan obviously preparing a second edition. Pixie was no niggard in sympathy, but for the moment she had other views. Two charming young men were waiting without in the sunshine, and any ordinary human girl prefers the sunshine and masculine society, to a room indoors and an hysterical sister. Therefore, being excessively human, Pixie flounced, and looked bored and impatient. She entered the room and shut the door behind her.

"What's the matter *now*?"

The answer was sufficiently unexpected.

"Pixie, if I die will you promise me faithfully to live here and take charge of my orphan boys?"

"I will not!" snapped Pixie sharply. It was just what might have been expected for Esmeralda to picture her own tragic death as the result of a passing squall. Quite possibly she had been sitting for the last hour picturing the stages of her own decline and the grief of the survivors. Strong common sense was the best remedy she could have. "I hope to have my own home to look after. And they are too spoiled. I wouldn't undertake the charge."

"Somebody," croaked Esmeralda deeply, "somebody must look after my boys!"

"Don't you worry about that. Geoffrey'll marry again. They always do when the children are young."

This was deliberate cruelty, but the strain was severe. Stanor was standing, racket in hand, gazing up at the window. The sunshine lit up his handsome face, his expectant smile. Pixie gave another flounce and turned impatiently to meet the next lament; but Esmeralda was silent, her hands were clasped on her knee, and tears—*real* tears—shone in her eyes. It was a rare thing for Joan to cry; the easy tears which rose to her sisters' eyes in response to any emotion, pleasurable or the reverse, these were not for her. Looking back over the history of their lives, Pixie could count the number of times when she had seen Joan cry. The outside world vanished from her memory in response to that appeal.

"Esmeralda! *Darling!* You are not ill? You are not really suffering?"

Joan shook her head.

"Quite strong," she murmured miserably; "too strong. Only it seems impossible to live on in such misery. It's gone—the mainspring, everything! I can't drag along! Thank God, Pixie, you are here! I never could bottle up my feelings. It's Geoffrey—he doesn't love me any more. I'm not imagining it—it's true! He told me himself."

"What did he say?" demanded Pixie practically. She displayed no dismay at the announcement, being used to her sister's exaggerations, and feeling abundantly convinced in her own mind that this was but another example. Geoffrey was cross this morning, but five days' residence under his roof had abundantly demonstrated that his love was not dead. "Now, what exactly *did* he say?" she repeated, and Joan faltered out the dread words.

There was silence in the room for a long minute. Then Pixie drew in her breath with a sharp intake. "The *bloom!*" she repeated softly. "The *bloom!*" The beautiful significance of the term seemed to occupy her mind to the exclusion of the personal application. She had a vision of love as the apotheosis of human affection, a wondrous combination of kindness, sympathy, courtesy, patience, unselfishness—all these, *and something more*—that mysterious, intangible quality which Geoffrey Hilliard had so aptly described. Given "the bloom," affection became idealised, patience a joy, and selfishness ceased to exist, since the well-being of another was preferred before one's own; courtesy and sympathy followed automatically, as attendant spirits who could not be separated. Affection might exist, did often exist, in churlish, unlovely form,

giving little happiness either to the giver or the recipient Love, the highest, was something infinitely precious, a treasure to be guarded with infinite care, lest in the stress of life its bloom should be destroyed.

Joan, looking with anxious inquiry in her sister's face, read there an earnestness even exceeding her own.

"Oh, *no!*" cried Pixie strongly. "Not that, not that, Esmeralda. Not the bloom. It mustn't go; it's too precious. It means everything. You mustn't *let* it go!"

"But I told you it *had* gone. It's too late."

"No!" Pixie shook her head. "I know better. There's time yet, if you'll be warned. Last night, when you were comforting Jack after his tumble, Geoffrey sat watching you as Dick watches Bridgie. It can't be all gone, when he looks like that. He has loved you, been proud of you, been patient with you for—how long is it you have been married? Seven years, and you need a lot of patience, Esmeralda! I suppose it's come to this—that you've used up all the patience he has."

It said volumes for Joan's penitence that she allowed such a statement to pass unchallenged, and even assented to it with meekness.

"I suppose that's it. For the first few years it was all right. When I got angry he only laughed; then he began to get impatient himself, and this last year things have been going from bad to worse. When he spoke straight out it was easier; there was a row royal, and a grand 'make up' at the end, but now he's so cold and calm." Esmeralda's lip trembled at the remembrance of the scene downstairs of the averted figure writing stolidly at the desk. She stared before her in silence for a dismal moment, then added sharply: "And what in the world set him off at a tangent this morning, of all others? There have been dozens of times when I should have expected him to be furious, and he's been as mild as a lamb; and then of a sudden, when I was all innocent and unsuspecting, to flare up like that! There's no sense in it!"

"It's always the way with men. You can't reckon on them," announced Pixie, with the seasoned air of one who has endured three husbands at least. "Dick's the same—an angel of patience till just the moment when you've made sure of him, and then in a moment he snaps off your head—my head, I mean, never Bridgie's. There's too much—bloom." She put her little head on

one side and pursed her lips in thought, with the characteristic Pixie air which carried Joan back to the days of childhood. "Now, isn't it odd, Esmeralda, how people cultivate almost every good quality, and leave love to chance? They practise patience and unselfishness, but seem to think love is beyond control. It comes, or—it goes. *Tant mieux! Tant pis!* My dear, if I married a husband who loved me as Geoffrey loved you, it would be the big work of my life to keep him at it, and I'd expect it to *be* work! You get nothing worth having without trouble, so why should you expect an exception for the very *best* thing? And the poor man deserves some encouragement. *I'd give it to him!*"

Joan's lips twisted into a sad smile.

"You understand a great deal, Pixie—more than I do, it seems, even after seven years! I never looked at things in that light. I just expected Geoffrey to keep on adoring, whatever I did. What made you think such things?"

"Nature!" said Pixie promptly. "And, my dear, I'm clever at loving—I always was. It's my only gift, and I *have* studied it just as other people study drawing and music. What you have to do, Esmeralda, is to forget everything and every one else for a while, and comfort Geoffrey. Don't make a scene and worry the poor man. Don't make a grand programme of reformation, for that will put him off at the start. Just begin to-night and be sweet to him for a change. If you feel temper coming on, have it out on me! I'm used to you from a child, and if I get too much of it I can always run away and leave you; Geoffrey can't. It's mean to take advantage of a man that's bound."

"If he *wanted* to go," began Joan haughtily, then subsided into tears and helplessness. "Pixie! Pixie! It's so difficult! What can I do?"

"D'you need *me* to tell you? Isn't it the *easiest* thing in the world to make love to your own husband, in your own house? Talk of propinquity! Always ready, always handy, if you can't manage *that*! My dear girl, the game's in your own hands."

"Can a leopard change its spots?"

"We're not talking of leopards; we're talking of women—and they *can* bridle their tongues!"

Again Joan was silent. *Could she?* A great martyrdom, or heroic effort, these she would have faced gladly, counting them a small price to pay for her husband's love; but then how to

subdue hasty impulses, to keep a watch over her tongue—this seemed beyond her strength. And yet the treasure which was threatened was of such inestimable value. It was impossible to contemplate life without it. Human life is uncertain, and though she would not allow herself to dwell upon such a possibility, Joan had realised in her heart that a day might dawn when she would have to part from husband or son. Death might come, she might have to say farewell to the dear human presence, but never, never had she imagined for a moment that she might be compelled to live on, having bidden farewell to *love*! Geoffrey her lover, Geoffrey her husband, Geoffrey the father of her boys, was it a fact or a dreadful nightmare that he had sat, untouched by her appeal, and confessed that ... that...

Joan winced, unable to bear the repetition, and locked her hands more closely on her knee. Pixie glanced furtively through the window. Stanor had turned back to the tennis-ground and the three-handed game had been resumed. She stifled a pang of disappointment and sat quietly waiting for further confidences, but presently Joan said quietly—

"Thank you, Pixie. Now—will you go? I want to think. You've been very sweet."

"More bracing than sweet, my dear; but it was what you needed!" Pixie rose with an alacrity which the other was, fortunately, too preoccupied to notice, dropped a kiss on the lovely bent neck, and walked quickly from the room. Joan had had the relief which her nature demanded of giving expression to her feelings; now it was best that she should be alone. Pixie had done her best to help, and now sunshine and Stanor were waiting! In another five minutes she was playing tennis as whole-heartedly as though it were her only business in life.

Meanwhile Joan sat alone in her upstairs room, struggling with all the force of her ardent, undisciplined nature to brace herself for the struggle which lay before her. Prayer had become of late a mechanical, stereotype repetition of phrases; to-day there were no phrases—hardly, indeed, any definite words. In the extreme need of life she took refuge in that voiceless cry for help, that child-like opening of the heart which is the truest relationship between the soul and God. She sat with closed eyes and lifted face, penitent, receptive, waiting to be blessed. For the time being doubts were forgotten, everything seemed straight and plain. Then, being Esmeralda, the wayward, the undisciplined, the mood of exultation faded, and depression held her once more. The heavenly help and guidance seemed far-off and unreal. She was seized with impetuous necessity to

act at once, to act for herself. Pixie's proposals failed to satisfy her ardent desires. To wait weeks or months for the reward she craved was beyond endurance. She must contrive something big, something soon, something that would demonstrate to Geoffrey her anxiety to please him. She racked her brain to find a way.

Poor, impatient, undisciplined Esmeralda! How little she dreamed of the tragic consequences of that hour!

Chapter Eleven.

Pixie Talks on Love.

The immediate cause of Geoffrey's displeasure having been in connection with the bazaar, it appeared to Joan that it was in that connection also that she must make an amend. He had complained that she had failed in interest and personal energy: by a supreme effort, then, she must demonstrate how his words had taken root.

It was the eleventh hour; any one but an impulsive Irish woman would have realised the futility of organising any fresh feature, and would have contented herself with doing well what was already planned, but such tame methods were not for the woman who had been Esmeralda O'Shaughnessy. She was accustomed to acting in haste; at home, at Knock, the most extensive entertainments had been organised at a few hours' notice, and how much easier it would be now with a staff of trained servants at her command and a purse full of money to buy the necessary accessories, instead of being obliged to manufacture all that was required out of ordinary household goods. Joan heaved a sigh of regret for the memory of those gay old days when a sheet and a pillow-case had provided a fancy costume which had captivated Geoffrey at a glance, then knitted her brows afresh in the effort to think out some scheme appropriate to the occasion.

The vicar's wife had lamented a lack of music which would afford variation from the prosaic business of buying and selling. At the time Joan had suspected a hint, and had resolutely turned a deaf ear. She hated singing to strangers, she hated singing in a building notably deficient in acoustic properties, she had not the faintest intention of victimising herself for the sake of a village throng. But now, with the new impetus driving her

on, nothing seemed too hard or distasteful. The vicar's wife should have her music—music with such accessories as it had never entered her modest head to imagine, music which should be the feature *par excellence* of the bazaar. Joan's was a quick, inventive brain; within half an hour she had mentally arranged her programme, made a list of the necessary accessories, and planned how they should be procured.

When the little party were again assembled for luncheon she was able to state her plans with an air of complete assurance which left them breathless with astonishment. She had decided to provide two short concerts, one in the afternoon, one in the evening. She would sing two songs; Pixie should do the same. They would all join in appropriate part songs. By way of a climax the last number on the programme should be illustrated by a *tableau vivant*. She proposed to write special words to a well-known air which, together with the tableau, should illustrate the benefits which the bazaar was destined to provide for the villagers. The tableau should represent a scene in a cottage interior in which were grouped four figures—a child suffering from an accident, a distraught mother, a helpless father, and in the background, bending beneficently over the patient, the parish nurse.

Esmeralda looked around for approval, and met the stare of blank and doubtful faces.

"Er—a bit lugubrious, isn't it, Mrs Hilliard?" ventured Stanor at last, voicing the general impression so strongly that Esmeralda's imagination instantly took another leap.

"Certainly not, for I should have a second tableau to follow to show the happy convalescence—child sitting up in bed, pale but smiling, nurse bringing in bunch of flowers, father and mother, with outstretched hands, pouring out thanks."

"That's better! That's more like it!"

The murmur of approval passed down the table. Pixie laid her head on one side in smiling consideration. Yes, it would go; arranged with Esmeralda's skill and taste the scenes would be pretty and touching, especially when seen to the accompaniment of her beautiful voice. The shortness of the time allowed for preparation troubled Pixie no more than her sister. She smiled at Esmeralda and nodded a cheery encouragement.

"I'll be the distracted mother, and weep into my apron. Honor will look a duck in a cap. Who's to be the little victim?"

"Jack, of course. He'll look too sweet," said Jack's proud mother. "Can't you imagine him, sitting up in bed with his curls peeping out beneath his bandages—he must have bandages—smiling like a little angel! He'd bring down the house. The people would love to see him."

Then for the first time Geoffrey spoke. So far he had listened to the conversation in a silence which both his wife and sister-in-law felt to be disappointingly unsympathetic. Now his objections were put into words—

"Isn't Jack rather young and—er—sensitive for such a public rôle? I should have thought that your concert would be complete without troubling about a tableau. In any case, there are plenty of village children."

"Not with Jack's face. He is sensitive, of course, but he's not shy; he'd enjoy the excitement. And we should be there; he could come to no harm."

"And the evening performance? Would you propose that he sat up for that also?"

Joan pressed her lips together in the struggle for patience. Really Geoffrey was too bad! What did he mean? What did he want? The whole scheme had been planned to give him pleasure, and here he was, silent, disapproving, throwing cold water. The effort at restraint made her voice sound unnatural even in her own ears.

"If we had the tableau in the afternoon, it would hardly do to leave it out in the evening—the only time when the villagers themselves will be able to be present."

Before Geoffrey could reply the heel of Pixie's shoe pressed firmly on his foot beneath the table, and a warning glance silenced his words. A moment later, when the discussion of pros and cons waxed loud at the far end of the table, she whispered an explanation—

"Don't object, don't argue. It's to *please you*! You said she had taken no trouble."

Geoffrey Hilliard's glance of comprehension had in it more of weariness than elation. Pixie noting the fact, felt a rising of irritation, and mentally dubbed him ungracious and unreasonable, as Esmeralda had done before her. Both failed to appreciate the fact that sudden spasms of energy were by no

means an innovation in the family history, and what the tired man was really longing for was that ordered peace and tranquillity which form the English idea of home. He made no further objections, however, and Joan threw herself wholeheartedly into her preparations, determined on a success which must win approval as by a *tour de force*.

The three days following were far from peaceful, but if the master of the house kept aloof from the stir and bustle, his guests threw themselves into it with every appearance of enjoyment. Strains of music sounded from the drawing-room and mingled with the tap-tapping of hammers from an upper room where realistic scenery was being manufactured under Joan's able supervision. The new system of thoroughness demanded, moreover, that the stored-up cases should be opened, and the contents unpacked, dusted, and re-priced, a work in itself of many hours.

The four guests started thereon with equal vigour, but Honor took an early opportunity of slipping away. She was tired, she had a headache, she must finish a book, there were half a dozen stock excuses, each one of which seemed to demand an instant adjournment to the garden. She made the announcement in a high, clear drawl and sailed out of the room without leaving time for protest. Whereupon Robert Carr attacked the work on hand with feverish zeal, worked like a nigger for five or ten minutes by the clock, and finally bolted out of the door, without, in his case, going through the form of an excuse. Then the two workers who were left looked out of the window and beheld the truants seated at extreme ends of a garden seat, hardly speaking to each other, looking on the most stiff and formal of terms.

Stanor laughed at the sight, but Pixie's practical mind could not reconcile itself to such contradictory behaviour.

"Where's the sense of it?" she asked. "Where's the fun? To play truant to sit on a bench and sulk! Wouldn't it be far more fun, now, to work up here with nice cheerful people like yourself and—me?"

But Stanor knew better.

"Not a bit of it," he returned. "They'd rather quarrel by themselves all day long than be happy with outsiders, even such fascinating people as ourselves. It's a symptom of the disease. Of course, you have grasped the fact that they *are* suffering from a disease?"

"I have. I can use my eyes. But *why?*" cried Pixie, rounding on him with sudden energy, "*why*, will you tell me, can't they be happy and comfortable and get engaged and be done with it? What's the sense of pretending one thing when you mean another, and sulking and quarrelling when you might—"

"Quite so," assented Stanor, laughing. "Odd, isn't it; but they *will*, you know. Never any knowing what they *will* do when it takes them like that. Besides, in this case there are complications. Miss Ward has pots of money, and poor old Carr has nothing but what he makes. He'll get on all right—a fellow with that chin is bound to get on—but it takes time, and meantime it's a bit of an impasse. A fellow doesn't mind his wife having *some* money—it's a good thing for her as well as for himself—but when it comes to a pile like that—well, if he has any self-respect, he simply can't do it!"

"If *I* had a pile, I'd expect my lover to accept it from me as gladly as I'd take it from him. If he didn't, I should feel he didn't love me enough."

"You'd be wrong there. He might love you enough to wish to save you from a jolly uncomfortable position. It's not right that a man should be dependent upon his wife. Puts him in a false position."

"Not if he really loved her. How could it? He'd realise then that in a life together there would be no '*yours*' or '*mine*.' It would all be '*ours*.'"

Stanor lifted his head to look at her, and Pixie's clear eyes met his in a full frank gaze which held no shadow of embarrassment. Here was something quite new—a girl who could speak about love to a young man without a trace of self-consciousness or flirtation, yet with an earnestness which demonstrated a keen personal interest. Stanor had many girl friends with whom he had often discussed the subject, but invariably a certain amount of self-consciousness had crept in, which had shown itself alternately in cynicism or sentimentality.

Now, to his own amazement, he realised that *he* was the one to feel embarrassment, while Pixie confided her sentiments as placidly as if he had been a maiden aunt. He stared at her as she stood before him, a trim, quaint little figure enveloped in a print overall, beneath which her feet appeared absurdly small and doll-like, and as he looked his heart gave a curious, unexpected leap. He had felt that leap before, and the meaning

of it was no mystery to him, though in this particular instance it was sufficiently astonishing.

Handsome, accomplished, the presumptive heir to a fortune, Stanor Vaughan had been a pet of society for the last half-dozen years, and being by nature susceptible to girlish charm had more than once imagined himself seriously in love. There had been, for example, that beautiful blonde whose society had turned a summer holiday into a veritable idyll. He had been on the verge of proposing to her when his uncle had suddenly summoned him home, and—well, somehow the restless misery of the first few days had disappeared with surprising rapidity, the vision had grown dim, and finally faded from sight.

Again it had been a charming brunette, and this time he had been sure of himself, perfectly sure. He was awaiting an opportunity to speak when again a summons had arrived, a pleasant one this time, since it took the form of an invitation to accompany his uncle on a prolonged continental tour. There had been no time to think. He had barely time to pack his bag and be off. And at the end of a month, well! He had begun to hesitate and doubt, and the episode ended like the first.

Curious, when he came to think about it, how the Runkle had in both cases played the part of *deus ex machina*. It was coincidence, of course, pure coincidence, for the old fellow had not known the girls even by name, but it was odd! As for his own part in the proceeding, both girls had been unusually charming specimens of the modern society girl, it was natural enough that he should have been impressed, but if it was really the fact that he was falling in love with this Irish Pixie, that was another, and a very different matter.

With a darting thought Stanor recalled his impressions on first meeting the girl a week before, and his own outspoken surprise at the insignificance of the sister of his beautiful hostess. A plain, odd little creature, that had been the involuntary verdict, but almost immediately it had been amended. Plain, but charming; distinctly the little thing had charm! Now, at the expiration of six days it had come to this, that his eyes no longer noted the faulty outline, but found a continual joy in watching the play of expression, the vivid life and interest of the sparkling little face. This was the real thing at last, Stanor told himself: it must be the real thing! Mingled with all his excitement and perturbation, he was conscious of a thrill of self-appreciation. It was not every man of his age who would put beauty of character before that of feature. He threw a deliberate *empressement* into his gaze, and said meaningfully—

"Your husband, Miss Pixie, will be a lucky man!"

"He will so," agreed Pixie warmly. She gave a soft, musical laugh as if the thought were a pleasant one to dwell on, but Stanor was sensitive enough to realise that his own image played no part in her dreams. She took up her pen and returned to the scribbling of prices on small paper labels. "Russian lace, five shillings a yard. Russian lacquer collar-box. Don't you hate that shiny red? Of course, when I talked of fortunes I was only putting myself in her place. I've nothing. None of us have. When My lover comes, there'll be only—*Me!*" The words sounded modest enough, but there was a complacency in the tilt of the head which told another story. Pixie O'Shaughnessy had no pity to waste on the man who should win herself.

Stanor's lip twisted in a self-conscious smile. The other girls had been rich. He pondered for a moment, and then said suddenly—

"I wonder, Miss Pixie, with your temperament, and—er—under the circumstances that you have not been fired with the modern craze to do something before now. Girls nowadays don't seem happy unless they have some work—"

"But I *have*, I have! Did you think I was idle?" She looked at him with reproachful eyes. "This is a holiday. I'm sampling luxury for a change, and I won't deny it's agreeable, but at home all the year I'm at work from morning to night. I don't know how to get *through* my work."

So she had a profession then, after all! Stanor felt an amused conviction that whatever the post might be the little thing would fill it uncommonly well. Small and child-like as she appeared, she yet carried with her that air of assurance which is the heritage of the capable. It interested him to consider for a moment what particular rôle she had adopted, and more than one possibility had passed through his head before he put the question into words—

"And what exactly *do* you do, Miss Pixie?"

She stared at him blankly.

"Now, if you'd asked me to say what I do *not* do, it would have been easier. Have you any sort of idea what it means to keep a home going with big ideas and little means, and a cook-general to thwart your efforts? If you have, you can imagine the list. Dusting, sewing, mending, turning, making, *un*-making, helping Bridgie, amusing the children, soothing the servants, humouring

Dick, making dresses, trimming hats, covering cushions, teaching the alphabet, practising songs, arranging flowers, watering plants, going to shops, making up parcels, writing notes, making—”

Stanor held up his hands in protest.

“Stop! Have pity on me! What an appalling list! Isn’t it nearly done? My ears are deafened! I am overcome with the thought of such activity!” Nevertheless the smile with which he regarded her was distinctly approving, for, like most men, he preferred domestic women who did not despise home work. “I’ll tell you what it is,” he added warmly, “Mrs Victor is like the other fellow—jolly lucky to have you! There are precious few girls who would give up their whole lives to a sister.”

“Bridgie is more than a sister. She’s meant father and mother and home to me for over ten years. My parents died when I was so young.”

“Like mine. That’s a point of union between us. My uncle has played the part of your Bridgie.”

“He has; I know it. He’s lame,” answered Pixie swiftly, and was amazed at the heat with which the young fellow replied—

“Lame? Who said so? Who told you? What does it matter if he *is* lame?”

“Not one bit. I was only—sorry. I didn’t mean to be unkind or to repeat anything I shouldn’t. Why are you vexed?”

He shrugged his shoulders, and snapped the scissors over a coil of string.

“Oh, nothing. Gets on one’s nerves a bit that’s all. He’s such a fine fellow, he would have been such a brick, but that wretched lameness has spoiled it all. Till he was eighteen he was as strong as a horse—a fine, upstanding young giant he must have been. Then came the accident—pitched from his horse against a stone wall—and for twelve solid years he lay on his back. That made him only thirty, but you would never have believed it to see him. He was a lot more like a man of fifty.”

Pixie laid her pen on the table, and rested her chin in the clasped hands. Her eyes looked very large and wistful.

"Twelve years on one's back would be pretty long. One would live so fast *inside* all the while one's body was idle. 'Twould age you. If it had happened when he was fifty, 'twould have been easier, but at eighteen one feels so lively and awake. Anything, *anything* would seem better than to do just nothing! To wake each morning and know there was nothing before one all the long hours, but to lie still! Other people would get accustomed to it for you—that would be one of the bits which would hurt the most—for you'd never be accustomed yourself. And which would be worst, do you think—the days when it was dull and the room was dark, or the days when the sun blazed, begging him to come out?"

Stanor shook himself with an involuntary shiver.

"Don't!" he cried sharply. "Don't talk like that! What an imagination you have! I've been enough cut up about it, goodness knows, but I never realised all that it meant. ... Well! He is better now, so we needn't grouse about it any more. It's only that's it's left a mark! He was turned in a moment from a boy into an old man—his youth was killed, *and he can't get it back!* That's one reason why he's so jolly anxious about me. Like most fellows he sets an exaggerated value on the things he has missed himself, and it's a craze with him to—as he calls it—'safeguard my youth.' He is trying to live his own lost days again through me, poor fellow, and it's a poor game. Outsiders take for granted that I'm his heir, but that's bosh. Fellows of thirty-five don't worry about heirs. He has never mentioned the subject; all he *has* done is to give me every chance in the way of education, and to promise me a good 'start off.' I'd have been ready to tackle serious work at once, but he is against a fellow having real responsibility until he's had time to feel his feet. I've had to work, of course—he's keen on that; but he's keen on recreation, too, and freedom from responsibility. He believes, poor chap, that if a fellow has freedom between twenty and thirty, he is better fitted to take up responsi—" Stanor stopped short suddenly, and the blood rushed to his cheeks. "I wonder!" he repeated blankly; "I wonder!"

For the first time revelation had come home to him with a flash that his uncle's interference in those two incipient love affairs had not been coincidence, but a deeply matured plan. He recalled occasions when chance words had betrayed a surprising acquaintance with his own doings, the houses at which he visited, and the feminine members of those households. Unsuspecting himself, he had doubtless betrayed more than he

knew. In more ways than one his uncle had determined to safeguard his freedom during these early years!

Stanor set his lips. The discovery was no more pleasant to him than it would be to any other young man of his age. A certain amount of "management" a fellow must be ready to accept from one who had been so generous a friend, but this was going too far. The Runkle must be shown that in purely personal matters his nephew would allow no one to interfere!

The frown continued for several minutes, but finally gave place to a smile, for a consideration of the present position had led him to a comfortable conclusion. The Runkle would be on a wrong tack this time! If he scented any attraction among the members of Mrs Hilliard's house-party, it would of a certainty be attributed to the pretty American heiress, Honor Ward. No one would suspect for a moment that the fastidious Stanor Vaughan had been laid captive by a plain and penniless Irish Pixie!

Chapter Twelve.

The Bazaar.

The morning of the bazaar was radiantly fine, so that one fear at least was banished from the hearts of the anxious stall-holders. No excuse now for patrons living at a distance! No room for written regrets, enclosing minute postal-orders. Any one who wanted to come, *could* come, and woe betide the contents of their purse!

Mrs Hilliard's stall was placed in the centre of the hall, and in accordance with her own directions had been made in the shape of a great round table, within the hollowed centre of which she and her girl helpers could be protected from the crowd, while without attendant sprites in the persons of the two young men hovered about ready to do their bidding.

Not a single article of needlework appeared upon the stall; not a solitary pincushion, nor handkerchief sachet, nor nightdress bag, not even so much as an inoffensive tray cloth. There was pottery from Portugal, and pottery from France, pottery from Switzerland in the shape of jam and marmalade jars, originally purchased for twopence apiece, and offered for sale at an alarming sacrifice for a shilling. There were beads from Venice, and tiles from Holland, and fans from Spain, and a display of

Venetian glass especially provided for the entrapment of county families. There was dainty English china (on sale or return), and flagons of Eau de Cologne, and white and blue Della Noblia plaques from Florence, and a dozen other dainty and perishable treasures.

"Everything!" exclaimed Pixie proudly, as she stood with arms akimbo to view the completed stall, "everything can break! Not one single thing that you couldn't smash in a twinkling, and no bother about it. It's what I call a most *considerate* stall, the most considerate I've ever seen!"

Esmeralda laughed with complacent understanding, but the two men stared aghast.

"Is it the object of purchasers to get rid of their purchases as soon as they are made? Then why do they bother to—"

"It is, and they have to. It's expected of them, and they can't escape, but you need to be soft-hearted and live in a poor neighbourhood to understand the horror of the bazaar habit. I'll tell you a story to the point." Pixie's eyes danced, she preened herself for prospective enjoyment.

"There was once a rich old lady, and she sent a pink satin cushion as a contribution to my sister Bridgie's stall at a military bazaar three years ago. 'Twas a violent pink, with sprays of dog roses and a frill of yellow lace, and not a soul would look at it if they had been paid for the trouble. 'Twas tossed about the stall for two whole days, and on the third, just at the closing, the Colonel's wife came in with five pounds in her pocket which had arrived by post for the cause. She wandered about like a lost sheep from one stall to another, looking for anything that would be of any use to anybody in the world, and it was an ageing process to get rid of four pounds five. Then she stuck. In the whole room there was not one thing she'd have been paid to buy.

"And then 'twas Bridgie's chance, and she beguiled her with the cushion for fifteen shillings, saying the down itself was worth it. So she bought it to make weight, and sent it to the Major's wife, with her dear love, for Christmas. The Major's wife wore it on the sofa for a whole afternoon when the Colonel's wife came to tea, and then packed it away in the spare room wardrobe till a young curate brought back a bride, and then she shook it up and ironed the lace and sent it, with all best wishes, for a wedding present. The curate's wife wore it for one afternoon, just in the same way, and then *she* packed it away, and when

Christmas came round she said to her husband that the Colonel's wife had been so kind and helpful, and wouldn't it be nice to make a slight return if it were within their means, and what about the cushion? So on the very next Christmas the Colonel's wife got a nice fat parcel, and when it was opened, there, before her eyes—"

"Ha, ha ha!"

"Ho, ho, ho!"

The two young men anticipated the point with roars of laughter, and Pixie whisked round to the other side of the stall to cock her head at a pyramid of green pottery, and move the principal pieces an inch to the right, a thought to the left, with intent to improve the *coup d'oeil*. To the masculine eye it did not seem possible that such infinitesimal touches could have the slightest effect, but then bazaars are intended primarily for the entrapment of women, and Pixie knew very well that with them first impressions were all important. Every shopkeeper realises as much, which is the reason why he labels his goods just a farthing beneath the ultimate shilling. The feminine conscience might possibly shy at paying a whole three shillings for a bauble which could be done without, but, let the eye catch sight of an impressive *Two*, and the small eleven three-farthings is swallowed at a gulp!

At two o'clock the bazaar was formally opened in a ceremony which took exactly ten minutes, and was so dull that it appeared to have lasted a long half-hour.

Geoffrey Hilliard, as squire of the village, gave an elaborate explanation of the pressing need of a parish nurse, which his hearers already understood far better than he did himself; the wife of a neighbouring squire said that she had found a parish nurse a great acquisition in her own village, and she had very much pleasure in declaring the bazaar open, and the vicar returned thanks to the neighbouring squire's wife for her kindness in "being present among us to-day," and then every one clapped feebly, and the bazaar had begun.

The few county people who were present sauntered round Esmeralda's stall, bought trophies of china and glass, and promptly whirled away in their motors, feeling that they had nobly discharged a duty. There was no denying the fact that it was a dull occasion, and an arduous one into the bargain for sales-women who wanted to get rid of their wares.

The hall was sparsely filled, and the good ladies who were present had come with a certain amount of money in their purses, and a fixed idea of the manner in which they intended to spend it. They would pay for admission, they would pay for tea, they would pay for the concert—conceivably they might even indulge in a second tea—they would purchase buttonholes of hot-house flowers, patronise side shows, and possibly expend a few shillings at the grocery stall (“Should have to buy them in any case, my dear!”) but there the list of their expenditure came to an end. Even when Honor and Pixie were driven out of their fastness, and walked boldly to and fro, hawking tempting selections from the stall, they met with but little success, for if there is no money left in the purse, the best will in the world cannot produce it.

“Wouldn’t you like to buy this lovely little plaque of Della Robbia, from Florence?” inquired Pixie genially of a group of portly matrons. “Reduced to seven and six. Ten shillings at the beginning of the afternoon. Less than cost price!”

“Very pretty!” murmured the ladies, and the portliest of them went a step further and added: “*And* cheap!” but no one showed the faintest disposition to buy.

“It would look so well in the dark corner of the drawing-room!” suggested Pixie, drawing a bow at a venture, and the three faces instantly became thoughtful and intent.

“That’s true. It might do that. Does it hang?”

“It is made to hang,” Pixie exhibited the holes pierced in the china, “but I should *prefer* it on a bracket! A bracket nailed across a corner at just the right height, and the plaque put across it, so that you could see it from all parts of the room.—Is your drawing-room blue?”

“Pale blue.”

“How charming! It would just set off this darker shade.”

“Mine is not blue. It is pink.”

“But think of the contrast! Blue and pink! What could be sweeter? It would look perfect against your walls! Shall I make it up safely in a box? We have a special parcels department.”

"Not to-day, thank you," said the owner of the blue drawing-room. "I'll think of it," said the owner of the pink. The silent third asked tentatively: "Could you make it five?"

The next group were more hopeless still. They didn't like Della Robbia. Common, they called it, that bright yellow and blue. Pixie was informed that if she offered the plaque for nothing it would be declined. She carried it dejectedly back to the stall, piled a tray with marmalade jars, gave it to Stanor to carry, and started off on another promenade.

"Marmalade jars! Fine marmalade jars! Who will buy my marmalade jars?" chanted the young man loudly, and the audience giggled, and listened with indulgent looks, even went so far as to finger the jars themselves, admire the design, and marvel how they could have been made for the price, but not a single one of the number had a vacancy for such an article in the home. Even when Stanor suggested that the jars were not dedicated to marmalade alone, but might be used for jam, for honey, for syrup, the supply seemed ridiculously out of proportion to the demand, and half an hour's exercise of his own pleading, seconded by Pixie's beguilements, brought in a total result of three shillings, which, to say the least of it, seemed inadequate.

"At this rate," said Esmeralda, "we shall have a van-load to take home!" Honor, seated dejectedly on an inverted packing-chest, discoursed in a thin, monotonous tone on the glories of charity sales in the States. They were always crowded, it appeared; policemen stood at the doors to prevent a crush; the buying was in the nature of a competition. Young girls offering wares for sale found themselves surrounded by throngs of millionaires, bidding against each other for the privilege of obtaining any article which she was pleased to offer. Having accomplished a purchase, it became the overwhelming desire of the purchaser to present the article in question as a votive offering to the fair sales-woman herself. ... Such a recital was hardly calculative to enliven the occasion. Esmeralda frowned, and Pixie sighed, and for the first time in her existence doubted the entire superiority of being born a Briton. She remembered her rebuffs with the Della Robbia plaque and thought wistfully of those millionaires!

The concert, however, was a success: the room was filled, the audience was appreciative, and lovely little Jack in the character of an invalid evoked storms of applause. The spirits of the performers were improved by their success, but as the audience now cleared off rapidly on dinner intent, there seemed no reason why Geoffrey, Stanor, and Robert Carr should not follow

their example. The suggestion was made, Esmeralda vouchsafed a gracious permission, and went off herself to parley with another stall-holder. The three men made for the door, with relief written on every line of their figures, and the two girls remained on duty seated on packing-cases.

"At home in the States," remarked Honor severely, "the men would not be *paid* to run off home to dine in comfort, leaving the girls alone to work."

"On sandwiches!" supplemented Pixie sadly, "and stewed tea!" She was hungry herself, and could have appreciated a well-cooked meal. "I'd like to know some American men," she opined. "You must be longing to get back to them, as they are so much more appreciative and polite than our men over here!"

Honor blushed, and regarded the points of her neat little shoes.

"There are a great many things, Pat-ricia," she said slowly, "that a girl ought to do if she were logical, and consistent, and acted up to what she preached. But she isn't, and she don't. I'm not in a mite of a hurry to get back..."

The hall was packed to overflowing for the evening concert, additional chairs were placed down the aisles, and even after they were filled, a number of people had to be content with standing places at the back. The performers peeping round the corner of the stage felt a mingling of nervousness and excitement, and vociferously instructed every one else to pull his or her self together, and do his or her best.

It soon became apparent, however, that the audience was indulgent to the point of boredom, applauding with consistency each item, good or bad, and demanding thereto an encore. Esmeralda's entrance brought down the house, Pixie's Irish ditties evoked shouts of applause, and the part songs but narrowly escaped being turned into choruses. It was, indeed, a village audience of the old-fashioned kind, assembled together in pleasant, friendly spirit, with the object of being amused, and determined that that object should be fulfilled.

The squire was a favourite, as he well deserved to be, and his beautiful wife was regarded with a fervent admiration, which her very aloofness had served to heighten. Other ladies might call round at cottage doors, and talk intimately concerning book clubs, and Dorcas societies, but no one expected such

condescension from Mrs Geoffrey Hilliard. She whizzed along in her great green car, or cantered past on her tall brown horse, followed by a groom in livery, vouchsafing a gracious smile in return for bows and curtseys. On Sundays she sat ensconced in the great square pew, a vision of stately beauty. ... The good dames of the village felt it the great privilege of this evening to see the squire's lady without her hat, with diamonds flashing at her throat, smiling, laughing, singing—a goddess descended from her pedestal to make merry on their behalf.

And so at last in the midst of this simple happiness came the time for the last item on the programme—that double tableau which every person in the hall was fated to remember, to the last day of his life!

Chapter Thirteen.

The Accident.

The curtain drew up on the first tableau. Joan sang appropriate words in the sweetest tones of her rich contralto voice, her eyes, like those of the audience, riveted on the face of the little invalid as he lay on his truckle bed. White-cheeked, bandaged, reclining, the transformation in the child's appearance was astounding. Considered as a piece of stage-craft, Joan had every reason to congratulate herself on the result, but the mother's heart felt a pang of dismay. The representation was too life-like! Just so would the darling look if the illness were real, not imaginary. In the afternoon he had not looked so ghastly. Was the double excitement too much for his strength? Joan's eyes turned from the stage to the first row of seats, where her husband had his place. Geoffrey looked worried; his brows contracted as he watched his son. Unconsciously Joan quickened the pace of the last verse of her song. She was anxious to get to the second tableau, to see Jack sitting up, smiling, his eyes alert.

The curtain fell. A low murmur from the audience swelled into somewhat forced applause. The villagers also, Joan realised, had felt the scene to be almost too realistic. Behind the scenes Honor as nurse and Pixie as mother propped the child's back with cushions, and showered kisses on his white cheeks.

"Smile, Jackey, smile!" they cried. "Now you are a getting-well boy, and all the people will see you, and be so pleased! Just

once more, darling, and then away we go, driving off home to supper in the car. Now a big smile!"

The curtain rose. Jack smiled his sweet, baby smile, and the audience burst into cheers of hearty relief. Every one was smiling—not only the invalid, but also the mother, the father, the neat, complacent nurse. Esmeralda's voice swelled in glad content. That last scene had been horrible; never, never again would she attempt to simulate so dreadful a reality! What a comfort to see the darling once more bonnie and smiling. Half an hour more and he would be safe in bed.

The curtain fell, was lifted again in response to a storm of applause, the piano strummed out the first bars of "God Save the King," and the audience, stumbling to their feet, began to join in the strain.

Suddenly, startlingly, a shriek rent the air, rising shrill above the heavy chorus of voices—the piercing, treble shrieks of a young child, followed by loud cries for help and a stampede of feet behind the curtain.

The music ceased. Geoffrey Hilliard and his wife rushed with one accord up the steps leading to the platform, the village doctor edged his way hurriedly through the crowded hall, the real parish nurse, wearing for the first time her new uniform, followed in his wake. And still the treble shrieks continued—the terrible, childish shrieks. The women in the audience shivered and turned pale. *Master Jack!* And only a moment before he had been playing at sickness. It was ill-work trifling with serious things. The pretty lamb! What could have happened?

Behind the curtain all was horror and confusion, a ghastly nightmare exaggeration of the scene just depicted. There on the same bed lay Jack, writhing in torture, the bandages charred and blackened, a terrible smell of burning in the air. Bending over him in torment stood the real father and mother; coming forward with calm, capable help came the veritable nurse.

How had it happened? How? By what terrible lapse of care had the precious child been allowed to fall into danger?

The mother's glance was fierce in its wrath and despair, but the explanation when it came was but too simple. Jack had been bidden to sit still in bed until his clothes should be brought; from the adjoining dressing-room. But for a moment Pixie had left his side, but in that moment a child-like impatience and restlessness had asserted itself with fatal consequences. Jack

had leapt up, rushed to the table, clutched at a glass of milk placed ready for his own refreshment, and in so doing had brought his bandaged head across the flame of an open candle, one of the small "properties" of the cottage scene. In an instant he was in flames; he threw up his little arm and the sleeve of the nightshirt caught the blaze; he ran shrieking to and fro, dodging pursuit, fighting, struggling, refusing to be held. For a moment the beholders had been too aghast for action; then Pixie leapt for the blankets, while Stanor overtook the child, tripped him up, wrapped and pressed and wrapped again; unfolded with trembling hands—

It was no one's fault. No one could be blamed. Jack was old enough to understand and obey, was proverbially docile and obedient. Under the same circumstances at home he would have been left without a qualm. The unusual circumstances had created an unusual restlessness not to be anticipated. Even at that bitter moment Joan realised that if it was a question of blame, she herself was at fault in having allowed the child to take part in the tableau against her husband's better judgment. A smaller nature might have found relief in scattering blame wholesale, but there was a generosity in Irish Esmeralda's nature which lifted her above the temptation. In the midst of her anguish she spared a moment to comfort Pixie by a breathless "Not your fault!" before she became unconscious of everything but the moaning figure on the bed.

The treatment of Jack's burns was completed with praiseworthy expedition. The local chemist flew on winged feet to his shop in the village street, whence he brought back all that was required. Nurse and doctor sent away the relatives, and worked with swift, tender fingers; and presently a swathed, motionless figure was carried out to an impromptu ambulance, fitted up inside the great car, while the late audience stood massed together in the street, looking on silent and motionless—silent as to speech, but from every heart in that crowd went up a cry to God, and every mother in the village knelt that night beside her bed and prayed with tears for the life of little Jack Hilliard, and for the support and comfort of his father and mother.

Jack lay motionless in the darkened room, a tiny form outlined beneath the bedclothes; on the pillow was a swathe of bandages, with barely an inch between to show the small, scarred face. The night before, with tossing curls, flushed cheeks, and curving coral lips, he had lain a picture of childish

beauty, at sight of which his parents' hearts had glowed with tenderness and pride as they paid their good-night visit.

"He looks flushed. All this rehearsing is exciting. I shall be glad when the tableaux are over," Geoffrey had said, and Joan had whispered back ardently—

"But so *lovely*! If he looks like that to-morrow!"

And this was to-morrow; and there on the bed lay Jack, shorn, blinded, tortured—a marble image that moaned, and moaned...

Through the night telephone and telegraph had been busy summoning the most skilful aid. Here at least was one blessing of wealth—that the question of expense need never be considered. This man for eyes, that man for skin, a third for shock to the nerves; the cleverest nurses, the newest appliances—the wonderful wires summoned them each in turn. Throughout the night motor-cars whirled up the drive, tall men in top coats, nurses in cloaks and bonnets, dismantled and passed into the house, mysterious cases were hurried up back stairways. Joan and her husband were banished from the sickroom, and sat in her boudoir awaiting the verdict. It was the first time they had been alone together since the accident, and when the door closed behind them Joan glanced at her husband with a quivering fear. His face was white and drawn. He looked old, and bowed, and broken, but there was no anger in his face.

"Geoffrey! Will you ever forgive me?"

For all answer he held out his arms. The old look of love was in his eyes, the old beautiful softness; there was no bitterness in his look, no anger, not the faintest shadow of blame.

"Dearest, don't! We both suffer. We must keep strong. We must help each other."

"Geoff, you warned me. You said it would be bad. It was against your wish ... It's my fault!"

"Darling, darling, don't make it worse!" He pressed her head against his shoulder with tender, soothing touches. "No one could have foreseen. I feared for excitement only; there was no thought of danger. We have enough to bear, sweetheart. Don't torture yourself needlessly."

"It's my doing, it's my punishment; I brought it about. I've been cold, and selfish, and ungrateful. I had so much I ought to have

been so thankful, but I was discontented—I made you wretched. God gave me a chance—” she pushed him away with frenzied hands and paced wildly, up and down the room—“a chance of salvation by happiness, and I was too mean, too poor to take it. Geoff, do you remember that poem of Stevenson’s, ‘The Celestial Surgeon’? They have been rinking in my head all night, those last lines, those dreadful lines. I was ‘obdurate.’ All the blessings which had been showered upon me left me dead; it needed this ‘darting pain’ to ‘*stab my dead heart wide awake!*’” She repeated the words with an emphasis, a wildness which brought an additional furrow into Geoffrey’s brow.

He sighed heavily and sank down on a corner of the sofa. All night long body and mind had been on the rack; he was chill, faint, wearied to death. The prospect of another hysterical scene was almost more than he could endure, yet through all his heart yearned over his wife, for he realised that, great as was his own sorrow, hers was still harder to bear. He might reason with her till doomsday, he might prove over and again that for the night’s catastrophe she was as free from blame as himself, yet Esmeralda, being Esmeralda, would turn her back on reason and persist in turning the knife in her own wound. Speech failed him; but the voiceless prayer of his heart found an answer, for no words that he could have spoken could have appealed to his wife’s heart as did his silence and the helpless sorrow of his face.

She came running to him, fell at his feet, and laid her beautiful head upon his knee.

“Geoff, it’s so hard, for I *was* trying! In my own foolish way I was trying to please, you. I may have been hasty, I may have been rash, but I *did* mean to do right.—I did try! I’ve loved you all the time, Geoff, but I was spoiled. You were too good to me. My nature was not fine enough to stand it. I *presumed* on your love. I imagined, vain fool! that nothing could kill it, and then you opened my eyes. *You* said yourself that I had worn you out.—It killed me, Geoff, to think you had grown tired!”

“Joan, darling, let’s forget all that. I’ve been at fault too; there were faults on both sides, but we have *always* loved each other; the love was there just as surely as the sun is behind the clouds. And now ... we *need* our love... I—I’m worn out, dear. I can’t go through this if you fail me. Bury the past, forget it. You are my wife, I am your husband—we *need* each other. Our little child!”

They clung together, weeping. In each mind was a great o'ershadowing dread, but the dread was not the same. The father asked of himself—Would the boy *die*? The mother—Would he live, blinded, maimed, crippled?

The door opened, a small face peered in and withdrew. Pixie had seen the entwined arms, the heads pressed together, and realised that she was not needed. She crept away, and sat alone watching the slow dawn.

The verdict of the specialists brought no lessening of the strain. It was too soon to judge; the shock was severe, and it was a question of strength holding out. Too soon to talk about the eyes. That must be left. There were injuries, no doubt, but in the present condition of inflammation and collapse it was only possible to wait. And to wait was, to the distracted mother, the most unbearable torture she could have had to endure.

The great house was quiet as the grave; the three guests had departed, little Geoff had been carried away by the vicar's wife to the refuge of her own full, healthful nursery. The boy was shocked and silenced by the thought of his brother's danger, but at five years of age a continuance of grief is as little to be expected as desired, and nothing could be left to chance. A cry beneath the window, a sudden, unexpected noise might be sufficient to turn the frail balance.

Pixie was alone, more helplessly, achingly alone than she had been in her life. The doors of the sickroom were closed against her. Joan had no need of her. Joan wanted Geoffrey—Geoffrey, only—Geoffrey alone to herself. Even Bridgie's telegraphed offer had been refused. "Not now! No. Don't let her come—later on," Esmeralda said, and turned restlessly away, impatient even of the slight interruption.

If it had been an ordinary, middle-class house, wherein sudden illness brings so much strain and upset, Pixie would have expended herself in service, and have found comfort in so doing, but in the great ordered house all moved like a well-oiled machine. Meals appeared on the table at the ordinary hours, were carried away untouched, to be replaced by others equally tempting, equally futile. Banks of flowers bloomed in the empty rooms, servants flitted about their duties; there was no stir, no stress, no overwork, no need at all for a poor little sister-in-law; nothing for her to do but wander disconsolately from room to room, from garden to garden, to weep alone, and pour out her tender heart in a passion of love and prayer.

"Christ, there are so many little boys in your heaven—leave us Jack! God, have pity on Esmeralda! She's his mother. ... *Her beloved son ... Must he go?*"

The silent house felt like a prison. Pixie opened a side door and crept out into the garden. The sun was shining cloudlessly, the scent of flowers hung on the air, the birds sang blithely overhead; to a sorrowful heart there seemed something almost brutal in this indifference of Nature. How could the sun shine when a little innocent human soul lay suffering cruel torture in that upper room?

Pixie made her way to her favourite seat at the end of a long, straight path, bordered on each side by square-cut hedges of yew. On the north side the great bush had grown to a height of eight or ten feet, with a width almost as great; on the southern side the hedge was kept trimmed to a level of four feet, to allow a view of the sloping park. For two hundred yards the path lay straight as a die between those grand old hedges; occasionally a peacock strutted proudly along its length, trailing its tail over the gravel, and then the final touch of picturesqueness was given to the scene, but even the approach of an ordinary humdrum human had an effect of dignity, of importance, in such old-world surroundings. It gratified Pixie's keen sense of what it dramatically termed "a situation" to place herself in this point of vantage and act the part of audience; and to-day, though no one more interesting than a gardener was likely to appear, she yet made instinctively for the accustomed place. The sombre green of the yew was more in accord with her mood than the riot of blossom in the gardens beyond, and she was out of sight of those terrible upper windows. At any moment, as it seemed, a hand from within might stretch out to lower those blinds ... Could one live through the moment that saw them fall?

Pixie leaned back in her seat, and lived dreamily over the happenings of the last three days. The morning after the accident the three visitors had made haste to pack, and depart in different directions—Honor and Robert Carr to town, Stanor Vaughan to friends at the other side of the county. Honor had relied on Robert's escort, but he had hurried off by the nine o'clock train, excusing himself on the score of urgent business, which fact added largely to the girl's depression.

It was four, o'clock. All day long Pixie had been alone, unneeded, unobserved, for Joan refused to leave the nursery floor, even for meals, and Geoffrey remained by her side. Looking back over the whole course of her life, the girl could not

remember a time when she had been so utterly thrown on herself. Always there had been some one at hand to love, to pity, to demand. At school, at the time of her father's death, there had been a bevy of dear girl friends—saintly Margaret, spectacled Kate, Clara of the high forehead and long upper lip, Lottie, pretty and clever, each vieing with the other to minister to her needs. Pixie followed in thought the history of each old friend. Margaret had become a missionary and had sailed for far-off China, Clara was mistress in a High School, Lottie lived in India, married to a soldier husband, Kate was domiciled as governess in Scotland. All were far away, all engrossed in new interests, new surroundings.

Later on, in Pixie's own life, a lonely time had come when she had been sent to Paris, to finish her education in the home of the dear school Mademoiselle. She had been lonely then, it is true—homesick, homeland-sick, so sick that she had even contemplated running away. But how good they had been to her;—Mademoiselle and her dear old father—how wise, how tactful, above all, how *kind*! Monsieur had died a few years before and gone to his last "repose," and Mademoiselle—marvellous and incredible fact—Mademoiselle had married a grey-bearded, bald-headed personage whom her English visitor had mentally classed as a contemporary of "*mon père*" and tottering on the verge of dotage. It appeared, however, by after accounts, that he was barely fifty, which Dick Victor insisted was an age of comparative vigour. "Quite a suitable match!" he had pronounced it, but Pixie obstinately withheld her approval. Mademoiselle, as mademoiselle, would have been a regular visitor for life; Madame, the wife of a husband exigent in disposition, and deeply distrustful of "*le mer*" must perforce stay dutifully at home in Paris, and was therefore lost to her English friends.

Ah! The years—what changes they brought! What toll they demanded! So many friends lost to sight, drifted afar by the stream of life. So many changes, so *many* breaks. *What would the years bring next?*

Pixie shut her eyes and leaned back in her seat, and being young, and sad, and faint, and hungry, and very, very tired, Mother Nature came to her aid, and laying gentle fingers on the closed lids sealed them in sleep, her kindest gift.

Pixie slept, and round the corner of this straight green hedge fate came marching towards her, with footsteps growing momentarily louder, and louder upon the gravel path.

Chapter Fourteen.

A Proposal of Marriage.

Stanor Vaughan stood with his hands thrust deep into his pockets looking down upon Pixie's pale, unconscious face. He had motored thirty miles to hear the latest news of the little patient—that was certainly *one* reason of his visit; but a second had undoubtedly been to see once more the little patient's aunt! At the house he had been informed that Miss O'Shaughnessy was in the garden, and had tracked her without difficulty to her favourite seat, and now there she lay, poor, sweet, tired little soul! With her head tilted back against the hedge, and the wee mites of hands crossed upon her lap—an image of weariness and dejection.

Stanor Vaughan felt within him the stirrings of tenderness and pity with which a strong man regards weakness in any form. Pixie was by nature such a jaunty little thing that it seemed doubly pathetic to see her so reduced. A fellow wanted to take her up in his arms, and comfort her, and make her smile again. A flush rose in Stanor's cheeks as he recalled an incident of the night of the accident. After the hurried return to the house, the three guests had sat alone, waiting in miserable suspense for the doctor's verdict, but Pixie had disappeared. No one knew where she had gone. Honor searched for her in vain, and at last in an access of anxiety Stanor himself took up the quest. He found her at last, perched on the wide window-seat of an upper window, but all his persuasions could not move her from her post.

"Let me stay here!" she persisted. "It comforts me. I can see—I can see the *lights*!"

"You mean the motor lamps as they come up the drive?"

"No," she said simply, "I mean the stars."

Stanor was as unimaginative as most men of his age, and his first impression was that the poor little thing was off her head. He crept downstairs and rang for a basin of the good warm soup with which he and his companions had been provided an hour before. When it was brought he carried the tray carefully up three long flights of stairs, and besought of Pixie to drink it forthwith.

She shook her head, and all his persuasions could not rouse her to the exertion; but being an obstinate young man, he but set his lips and determined to succeed.

This time, however, he resorted to force instead of persuasion, for, having placed the tray on a corner of the sill, he filled the spoon with soup and held it determinedly to the girl's lips. Now, if she moved or made a fuss, the soup would assuredly be spilled, and no living girl would voluntarily pour soup over her frock! But Pixie made no fuss. Meekly, obediently as a little bird, she opened her lips, and swallowed, and swallowed again and again, until the bowl was emptied of its contents. There was something so trustful and unconscious about the action that the young man felt the smart of tears in his eyes—the first tears he had known for many a long year.

When the soup had been finished he went away again, and came back with a warm shawl which he had procured from a maid. In wrapping it round the quiescent figure his hands had accidentally come in contact with hers, and finding them cold as ice, it seemed the natural thing to chafe them gently between his own. Quite natural also Pixie appeared to find the action, for the cold little fingers had tightened affectionately round his own. It was left to him to flush and feel embarrassed; Pixie remained placidly unmoved.

The memory of those moments was vivid with Stanor as he stood this morning looking down on the sleeping girl. All through the three days of separation her image had pursued him, and he had longed increasingly to see her again. The tragic incidents of that long night had had more effect in strengthening his dawning love than many weeks of placid, uneventful lives. It had brought them heart to heart, soul to soul; all the little veneers and conventions of society had been thrust aside, and it seemed to him that the crisis had revealed her altogether sweet and true.

When a young man is brought suddenly face to face with death, when it is demonstrated before his eyes that the life of the youngest among us hangs upon a thread, he is in the mood to appreciate the higher qualities. Stanor had told himself uneasily that he had been "too slack," that he had not thought enough about "these things." The friends with whom he had consorted were mostly careless pleasure-lovers like himself, but this little girl was made of a finer clay. To live with her would be an inspiration: she would "pull a fellow together." ... There was, however, to be quite honest, another and less worthy impetus which urged Stanor forward, but over this he preferred to draw

a mental veil. We are all guilty of the absurdity of posing for our own benefit, and Stanor, like the rest, preferred to believe himself actuated wholly by lofty motives rather than partially by the wounded pride of a young man who has just discovered that he has been "managed" by an elder!

He sat down on the seat beside Pixie, and laid his hand gently over hers. They opened automatically to receive it; even before she lifted her lids he felt the welcoming touch; and felt it characteristic of her nature.

"You!" she cried gladly, "Mr Vaughan, 'tis you! Oh, that's nice! Was I sleeping, that I didn't see you come? I thought I should never sleep again. Jack can't sleep! If he slept he might get well."

"He is sleeping now," said Stanor quietly. "A man was sent to the lodge to answer all inquiries, so that there should not be even a crunch on the path. He is sleeping soundly and well. If he sleeps on—"

Pixie nodded, her face aglow.

"Oh, thank God! *How* I thank Him! Sleep will make all the difference. ... Till now it's been nothing but a moment's nap and awake again, with a scream. We've *agonised* for sleep! I could not have gone off so soundly if I hadn't known, *inside*, that Jack was asleep too. When you love anyone very, very much, what touches them touches you. You can't keep apart. You mayn't always know it with your *mind*, but the best part of you, the part that feels, *it* knows!"

She smiled in his face with frank, glad eyes, but Stanor flushed and looked at the ground.

"Should you know it, if *I* were unhappy, Pixie? I should know it about you. I came this afternoon partly, mostly, because I knew how you'd be feeling, and I thought, I hoped, that I might help. Does it help you, Pixie, to have me sitting beside you, instead of being alone? Ought I to have come, or stayed away?"

"I'm glad you came; I love to have you. I've been sad before this, but I've never been sad by myself! Esmeralda isn't my sister at this moment, she's just Jack's mother, and there's only one person who can help her, and that is Jack's father. Later on 'twill change!" A flash of joy lit up the white face. "Do you know what I'm waiting for? If Jack lives, as soon as he's conscious and out of pain he'll send for me! He'll want me to tell him

stories, and the stronger he grows the more stories he'll want! He'll need me then—they'll all need me!"

"Of course they'll need you. Other people need you, Pixie, besides your relations. Why do you always go back to them? I was speaking of myself. *I* need you! I've felt all at sea without you these last days. I never met a girl like you before. Most girls are all one way or another—so serious that they're dull, or so empty-headed that it's a waste of time to talk to them. You—you are such a festive little thing, Pixie; a fellow could never be dull in your company, and yet you're so good! You have such sweet thoughts; you are so unselfish, so kind."

"Go on!" cried Pixie urgently. "Go on!" Her cheeks had flushed, her eyes sparkled with animation. "It's the most reviving thing in the world to hear oneself praised, I could listen to it for hours. In what particular way, now, would you say that I was 'sweet?'"

She peered at him, complacent, curious, blightingly unconscious of his emotions, and the young man felt a stirring of hot impatience. Insinuation and innuendo were of no use where Pixie O'Shaughnessy was concerned; an ordinary girl might scent a proposal afar off and amuse herself by an affectation of innocence, but nothing short of a plain declaration of love would convince Pixie of his sincerity.

"Pixie," he said suddenly, "look at me!" He took her hands in his, and drew her round so as to face him as they sat. "Look at me, Pixie," he repeated. "Look in my eyes. Tell me, what do you see?"

Pixie looked, her own eyes wide and amazed. Her fingers stirred within his hands with a single nervous twitch, and then lay still, while into her eyes crept an expression of wonder and awe.

"I don't know.—I don't know. ... What do I see?"

"Love, Pixie! My love. My love for you. ... I've fallen in love with you, darling; didn't you know? I knew it that last evening when we were together upstairs. I've known it better and better each day since; and to-day I couldn't stay away, I couldn't wait any longer. ... Pixie, do you love me too?"

"Of course I love you. How could I help it?" cried Pixie warmly. Her fingers tightened round his with affectionate pressure, her eyes beamed encouragingly upon him.

Never could there have been a warmer, a more spontaneous response, and yet, strange to relate, its very ardour had a chilling effect, for Stanor, though young, was experienced enough to realise that it is not in this fashion that a girl receives a declaration of love from the man of her heart. He himself had struggled with shyness and agitation; he was conscious of flushed cheeks, of a hoarseness of voice, of the beating of pulses; then surely a girl taken by surprise, faced suddenly, with the question of such enormous import, should not be less moved than he.

The words died upon his lips; involuntarily his hands relaxed their grasp. There was a moment of impossible impasse and strain before, with a realised effort, he forced himself to express a due delight.

"That makes me very happy, Pixie. I—I was afraid you might not care. I'm not half good enough for you, I know that, but I'll do my best. I'll do everything I can to make you happy. I'm not rich, you know, darling; we should have to live on what I can make independently of the uncle, for he has peculiar views. He doesn't wish me to marry."

"*Marry!*" repeated Pixie deeply. She sat bolt upright in her seat, her eyes suddenly alight with interest and excitement. Incredible as it might appear, Stanor realised that this was the first moment when the idea of marriage had entered her brain. "Is it *marrying* you are talking about? You want *me* to marry you?"

"You funny little soul. Of course I want it. Why else should I talk about loving?"

"I thought," she said sighing, "it was just nice feeling! It's natural for people to love each other. When they live together in the same house and come through trouble. ... And we're both attractive. ... You don't need to marry every one you love!"

"I do," declared Stanor, "when it's a girl—when it's *you*! I want to have you for my own, and keep you to myself, and how can I do that if you're not my wife? If you love me, you must want to be with me too. Don't you, dear, don't you wish it? Shouldn't you like to be my wife?"

Pixie tilted her head in her well-known attitude of consideration.

"I—I think I should!" she pronounced judicially. "I liked you from the moment we met, and you've a good disposition."

Dispositions are important in marriage. And I'm domestic; you like domestic girls, and it's convenient when you're poor. ... On how much a head would you expect me to keep house?"

But that was too much for Stanor's endurance; he seized her in his strong arms and shook her with a tender violence.

"Pixie, you little witch, don't be so blightingly matter-of-fact! I'm making you a declaration of love. Kindly receive it in a suitable fashion. ... A—a fellow expects a girl to be a little—er—sentimental and poetic, and—er—overcome, don't you know, not to begin at once to talk of *how much a head!*"

"I've never been proposed to before. You must excuse me if I make mistakes. I'm quite willing to be sentimental; I dote upon sentiment," declared Pixie in anxious propitiation. ... "Let's go back to where you were talking about me! Tell me *exactly* what it is that you most admire?"

Stanor had been hoping for a little adulation for himself, but he gallantly stifled his feelings and proceeded to offer the incense which he believed would be most acceptable.

"Your character, darling. Your sweet and tender heart!"

"How nice," said Pixie flatly. She sat silent for a moment and then ventured tentatively, "*Not* my personal charm?"

"*And* your personal charm. Both! You've more personal charm than any girl I know."

This was something like! Pixie beamed content. At this moment she felt really "engaged," and agreed rapturously with all the encomiums which she had heard given to this happy condition. Success emboldened her to further flights.

"The first time you met me you didn't admire me then! My *appearance*, I mean! You remember you said—"

"I did. Yes! But you were so sweet in forgiving me that I admired you instantly for *that!*" cried Stanor, skilfully turning the subject to safer ground. "And when you're my wife, Pixie, you will seem the most beautiful woman in the world in my eyes. It is very unworldly of you to consent without asking more about my affairs, for I am a poor match for you, little one. It takes years for a man to make a decent income in business, and I have so little experience. My uncle has always promised to buy me a partnership in some good firm, but of course there

would have to be some preliminary training. And if he did not ... approve..."

"But he *must* approve; we must make him. We couldn't marry without his consent. He's been so good to you!"

"He has, uncommonly good; but when it comes to marrying, it's a fellow's own affair. I shall go my own way..."

"He's lame!"

"Dear little girl, what has that to do with the case in point?"

"Well, I think it has!" persisted Pixie obstinately. "It has to me. We must be nice to him, Stanor, and *make* him be pleased, whether he wants to or not. ... Did you notice how naturally I called you 'Stanor'?"

"I did! Couldn't you manage to put something before it by way, of completion?"

"Nice Stanor! Handsome Stanor! Clever, sensible, discriminating Stanor!"

"Quite so," said the discriminating one dryly, "but I should have liked—" Suddenly he burst into a ringing boyish laugh. "This is the *rummiest* proposal that was ever made!"

Pixie looked anxious.

"Is it? 'Rum'? What exactly does 'rum' mean, applied to a proposal? It didn't sound approving. It's my very own proposal, and I won't have it abused. I've enjoyed it very much. ... I think we shall be very happy, Stanor, when we are married and settled down in our own little house."

Stanor looked at her keenly, and as he looked he sighed.

"Dear little Pixie," he said gently, "I hope we shall!"

Chapter Fifteen.

Esmeralda is Troubled.

"Engaged!" cried Esmeralda shrilly. "Engaged! You! To Stanor Vaughan? Pixie O'Shaughnessy, I never heard such nonsense in my life."

"Then you've listened to an uncommon amount of sense. I should not have thought it, to judge from your actions," returned Pixie, nettled, "'Twould be interesting to hear what strikes you as so ridiculous about it!"

It was three days after Stanor's unexpected visit with its momentous consequences, but in consideration of the anxiety of Jack's parents, the news had been withheld until the boy had been pronounced out of danger. Only this morning had the glad verdict been vouchsafed. Jack would live; given a steady, even improvement, with no unforeseen complications, he would live, and in a few weeks time be up and about once more. The eye trouble would be more lasting, for the child was of a peculiarly sensitive nature, and the shock seemed inclined to localise itself in the eyes. The sight itself would be saved, but for some years to come it would need the most careful tending. He must wear darkened spectacles; be forbidden to read; be constantly under skilled care. Given such precautions the sight would probably become normal in later years...

When the first verdict was given, the father, and mother clung to one another in an ecstasy of relief and thankfulness. Throughout those last terrible days, when every conscious breath had carried with it a prayer, Joan had looked deep into her own soul and beheld with opened eyes the precipice on which she stood. How far, how far she had travelled since those early married days, when, with her first-born in her arms, her highest ambition had been that she should be enabled so to train him that he should grow up, to be, in the words of the beautiful old phrase, "A soldier of Christ!" Of late years she had had many ambitions for her boys, but they had been ambitions of the world, worldly. The old faith had been gradually neglected and allowed to sink into the background of life. In her own strength she had walked, in her own weakness she had failed. Yet now, in default of punishment, goodness and mercy were once more to be her portion! All the nobility in Joan's nature rose up as she pledged herself afresh to a new—a higher life! Jack would live, their boy would live—that was for days the one thought of which the parents were conscious. For the father it was perfect joy, but for the mother there still remained a pang. Only Esmeralda herself ever knew the anguish of grief which she endured on account of her baby's altered looks. Little Jack, with his angel face, his halo of curls, his exquisite, innocent

eyes, had been a joy to behold. Waking, sleeping, merry, sad—at one and every moment, of his life the mere sight of him had been as an open sesame to the hearts of those who beheld. The knife turned in his mother's heart at the thought of *Jack* shorn, scarred, spectacled. She dared not confide her grief to her husband. He would not understand. *Looks!* What could looks matter, when the child had been delivered from death? Joan could see in imagination the expression on his face, hear the shocked tones of his voice; she would not betray her feelings and risk a break of the new, sweet understanding between them. All men were alike. There were occasions when only another woman could understand.

Joan went upstairs to the empty nursery and found Marie weeping in her chair.

"*Petite lapin! Petite chérie! Petite ange!* Comfort thyself, Madame," she sobbed, "we can have glasses like the young American—she who visited Madame last year. No rims hardly to be observed! And the hair—that will grow—of a surety it will grow. A little long upon the forehead, and *voilà!* The scar is hid. ... A little care, Madame, a little patience, and he will be once more our *petit amour!*"

"Marie," said her mistress firmly, "looks are a secondary affair. We ought to be too thankful to *think* of looks!"

"*C'est vrai,* Madame," replied Marie demurely, "*C'est vrai,*" and Joan Hilliard went back to her room with a lightened heart, and determined to write at once to town to ask particulars concerning rimless spectacles.

And now here was Pixie, with this preposterous, ridiculous tale! At sight of her young sister Joan had felt a pang of contrition. She had forgotten all about her these last terrible days. Poor girl! She must have been terribly lonely, but that was the best of Pixie—she was always ready to forgive and forget. Joan kissed her warmly, murmured apologies, and inquired affectionately how the long days had been passed. And then—out it came!

"Why ridiculous?" echoed Joan. "My dear, how could it be anything else? Five days ago, when we were all together, there wasn't a sign of such a thing. Stanor was attracted by you, of course; but he was not in love. He was always cheerful, always merry. How different from poor Robert, who is eating his heart out for Honor Ward!"

"I hope," said Pixie deeply, "that Stanor will always *keep* cheerful. It won't be my fault if he does not. No man shall 'eat his heart out' for me if I can help it!"

Joan glanced at her quickly. She had caught the tone of pain in the beautiful voice, and softened to it with instant response.

"Yes, dear, of course. You'd never flirt, you're too honest, but, all the same, Pixie, I stick to my opinion. I don't believe for a moment that Stanor Vaughan is in love with you, and I'm positively sure that *you* are not in love with him!"

"Can you look into my heart, Esmeralda, and see what is there?"

"Yes, I can. In this instance I can. Fifty times better than you can yourself. You are pleased, you are flattered, you are interested. You were miserable and lonely, (that's my fault, for leaving you alone. I don't know what Bridgie will say to me!) and Stanor was sorry for you, you appealed to his chivalry, and you were just in the mood to be swept off your feet, without realising what it all meant. Pixie, when you told me just now, you were quite calm, you never even blushed!"

"I don't think," reflected Pixie thoughtfully, "I ever blushed in my life."

It occurred to her uncomfortably that Stanor also had noticed the omission, and had felt himself defrauded thereby. She wondered uneasily if one could *learn* to blush!

As for Esmeralda, the words carried her back in a rush to the dear days of childhood, when the little sister had been the pet and pride of the family. Indeed, and Pixie had had no need to blush! Her very failings had been twisted round to pose as so many assets in her favour, while her own happy self-confidence had instilled the belief that every one wanted her, every one appreciated. What cause had Pixie O'Shaughnessy to blush?

"Mavourneen!" cried Esmeralda tenderly, "I know. Thank God you've never needed to blush or feel afraid, but, Pixie, when love comes, it's different, everything is different! It's a new birth. The old confidence goes, for it's a new life that lies ahead, and one stands trembling on the brink. ... If what you feel is the right thing, you'll understand. Pixie, dear, do I seem the wrong person to talk like this? You know how it has been with us. We drifted apart—Geoff and I—so far apart that I thought ... I can't talk of it—you know what I thought—but, Pixie think! If the

feeling between us had not been the *real* thing, if we had married on affection only, where should we have been now? Geoffrey loved me so much that he bore with me, through all these years of strain, and when this great trouble came, he forgave me at once, forgave everything, blotted it right out, and thought of nothing but how to help me most. A cloud had rolled up between us, but it was *only* a cloud, the love was there all the time, hidden, like the sun, ready to shine out again. ... Oh, Pixie, dear, the right thing is so wonderful, so grand, that I can't let you miss it for the sake of a mistake. You are so young. You don't understand. Let me write to Stanor to-night and tell him it's a mistake, that you didn't know your own mind!"

"You may talk till doomsday, Esmeralda," said Pixie quietly, "but I shall keep my word!"

Mentally Pixie had been deeply impressed by the other's confidences, and not a little perturbed thereby, but it was against her sense of loyalty to allow such feelings to appear. To her own heart she confessed that she was altogether without this strange sense of elation, this mysterious new birth which Esmeralda considered all important under the circumstances. She was certainly happy, for with Stanor's coming the cloud which had hovered over the house had begun to disperse. She had opened her own eyes to the good news of Jack's first sleep, and each day the improvement had continued, while Stanor motored over, to sit by her side, cheering her, saying loving, gentle things, building castles in the air of a life together. ... Yes, she was *very* happy, but ... she had been happy before, there was nothing astoundingly, incredibly *new* in her sensations.

Pixie sent her thoughts back into the past, endeavouring to recall recollections of Joan's engagement, of Bridgie's, of Jack's. Yes, certainly they had all become exceedingly different under the new conditions. She recalled in especial Bridgie's face beneath her bridal veil. Child as she herself had been at that time she had been arrested by that expression: nor had she been allowed to forget it, for from time to time during the last six years she had seen it again. "The *shiny* look!" she had christened it in her thoughts. Sweet and loving were Bridgie's eyes for every soul that breathed, but that one particular look shone for one person alone! Pixie's heart contracted in a pang of longing; it was almost like the pang she had felt in the drawing-room of Holly House on that dread afternoon when the news of her father's death had been broken to her—a pang of longing, a sore, sore feeling of something wanting. She

shivered, then drew herself together with indignant remembrance. She was *engaged*! What sentiments were these for an engaged girl? How could she feel a blank when still more love was added to her share?

"If you talk till doomsday, Esmeralda, I'll keep my word. Stanor loves me and says I can help him. I said I would, and, me dear, *I will*! We've been through a lot of trouble this last week, isn't it a pity to try to make more for no good? My mind's made up!"

Joan Hilliard was silent. In her heart of hearts she realised that there was nothing more to say. Pixie was Pixie. As well try to move a mountain from its place, as persuade that sweet, loving, most loyal of creatures to draw back from a solemn pledge. Something might be done with Stanor perhaps, or, failing Stanor, through that erratic person, his uncle. She must consult with Geoffrey and Bridgie, together they might insist upon a period of waiting and separation before a definite engagement was announced. Pixie was still under age. Until her twenty-first birthday her guardians might safely demand a delay. Joan knew that Stanor Vaughan had had passing fancies before now, and had little belief that the present entanglement would prove more lasting. Circumstances had induced a special intimacy with Pixie, but when they were separated he would repent.—If he himself set Pixie free! ... So far did Joan's thoughts carry her, then, looking at the girl's happy face, she felt a sharp pang of contrition.

"Me dear, I want you to be happy! If it makes you happy to marry Stanor, I'll give you my blessing, and the finest trousseau that money can buy. You're young yet, and he has his way to make. You'll have to wait patiently, for a few years, until he can make a home, but it's a happy time, being engaged. I feel defrauded myself to have had so little of it. Storing up things in a bottom drawer, and picking up old furniture at sales, and polishing it up so lovingly, thinking of where it is going, and letters coming and going, and looking forward to the time when he'll come down next—'tis a beautiful time. Three or four years ought to pass like a trice!"

"Besides leaving plenty of time to change your mind. I know you, me dear!" cried Pixie shrewdly. "I see through you! You'll be relieved to hear that the date has not been mentioned, but you can start with the trousseau as soon as you please. I'll take it in quarterly instalments, and spin out the pleasure, besides sparing my friends the shock of seeing me suddenly turn grand. My affianced suitor is coming to proffer a formal demand for my hand. Will ye be kind to him now, and give him some tea?"

"I will," said Joan readily. To herself she added: "We are all alike, we O'Shaughnessys, we will be led, but we will *not* be driven. It's no use appearing to object! Things must just take their course..."

Chapter Sixteen.

The "Runkle" intervenes.

As little Jack continued to progress towards convalescence, the attention of the household became increasingly absorbed by the astounding fact of Pixie's projected engagement. Bridgie, detained at home by malapropos ailments on the part of the children, wrote urgent letters by daily posts, contradicting herself on every point saving one alone—the advisability of delay. Geoffrey Hilliard as host, Dick Victor as guardian, Jack, Pat, and Miles as brothers, proposed, seconded, and carried by acclamation the same waiting policy. And no one who has the faintest knowledge of human nature will need to be told that such an attitude had the effect of rousing the youthful lovers to the liveliest impatience.

Stanor in particular was moved to rebellion. His pride was hurt by so lukewarm a reception of his addresses, which was all the more disagreeable for being unexpected. The Hilliards had shown so much friendship and hospitality to him as a friend, that he had taken for granted that they would welcome him in a closer relationship. He was not a great *parti* it was true, but then by her own confession Pixie had no fortune of her own, and had been accustomed to modest means. Stanor did not say to himself in so many words that he happened to possess an exceptionally handsome and popular personality, he refused even to frame a definite thought to that effect; nevertheless the consciousness was there, and added to his chagrin.

Lounging along the country lanes, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, Stanor told himself that it was a disappointing old world: a fellow always imagined that when he got engaged he would have the time of his life; in books a fellow was represented as walking upon air, in a condition of rapture too intense for belief—it was disappointing to find his own experience fall so short of the ideal!

Sweet little Pixie, of course, was a beguiling creature. Stanor would not admit any shortcomings in his *fiancée*, but he did

allow himself to wonder tentatively if he had spoken too soon: if she were not, perhaps, a trifle young to understand the meaning of the new claim. The daily interviews which he had been vouchsafed had been full of interest and charm, but they had not succeeded in stifling the doubt which had marred the first minutes of acceptance, for alas! it was when Pixie was the most affectionate that her lover was most acutely conscious of the subtle want. And then, as if there was not already enough worry and trouble, there was the Runkle. ... The Runkle would be bound to put in his oar!

Stanor had delayed sending word of his engagement to the man who stood to him in the place of a father, silencing his conscience by the assertion that there was yet nothing to announce. Until Pixie's guardians came down from their present unnatural position, there might be an understanding, but there could not be said to be a formal engagement.

It was Pixie herself who finally forced him to dispatch the news. It was Stanor's first experience of arguing a point with a woman, and a most confusing experience he found it. Pixie invariably agreed with every separate argument as he advanced it, saw eye to eye with him on each separate point, sympathised warmly with his scruples, and then at the very moment when she was expected to say "yes" to the final decision, said "no," and stuck to it with conviction. Questioned as to the reason of such inconsistency, she had only one excuse to plead, and she pled it so often and with such insistence that it seemed easier to give in than to continue the argument. "Yes, but he's lame!" came back automatically as the answer to every remonstrance, till Stanor shrugged his shoulders and sat down to write his letter.

Pixie was indeed, as the family had it, "the soft-heartedest creature!" He loved her for it, but none the less depression seized him anew. Now there would be the Runkle to tackle! More arguments! More objections! A fellow ought to be jolly happy when he was married, to make up for all the fuss and agitation which went before...

Stanor's letter of announcement was short and to the point, for he was not in the mood to lapse into sentiment. By return of post came the Runkle's reply, short also, and non-committal—nothing more, in fact, than the announcement that he preferred to discuss the matter in person, and would the following day arrive at a certain hotel, where he bade his nephew meet him. Stanor therefore made his excuses to his hostess, packed his bag, and dispatched a letter of explanation to his *fiancée*,

unconscious of the fact that she was at that very hour receiving information first hand.

It came about in the most natural, and simple fashion. As Pixie, roaming the grounds bareheaded to gather a bouquet of wild flowers to present to the little invalid, emerged suddenly upon the drive, she found a tall, grey-coated stranger leaning against a tree in an attitude expressive of collapse. He was very tall, and very thin; the framework of his shoulders was high and broad, but from them the coat seemed to flap around a mere skeleton of a frame. His hair was dark, his complexion pale, and leaning back with closed eyes he looked so alarmingly ill and spent, that, dropping the flowers to the ground, Pixie leaped forward to the rescue.

"You're ill. ... Let me help! There's a seat close by. ... Lean on me!"

The stranger opened his eyes, and Pixie started as most people *did* start when they first looked into Stephen Glynn's eyes, which were of that deep, intense blue which is romantically dubbed purple and fringed with dark lashes, which added still further to their depth. They were sad eyes, tired eyes, eyes of an exceeding and pitiful beauty, eloquent of suffering and repression. They looked out under dark, level brows, and with their intense earnestness of expression flooded the thin face with life. As she met their gaze Pixie drew a quick, gasping breath of surprise.

The stranger in his turn looked surprised and startled; he bent his head in involuntary salute, and glanced down at the tiny arm offered for his support. Six foot two he stood in his stockinged feet, and there was this scrap of a girl offering her little doll-like arm for support! His lips twitched, and Pixie pounced on the meaning with her usual agility.

"But I'm wiry," she announced proudly. "You wouldn't believe my strength till you try it. Just for a few yards. ... Round the corner by the oak-tree. *Please!*"

"You are too kind. I am not ill, but the walk from the station is very steep and I found it tiring, that's all. I shall be glad to rest for a moment, but I assure you no help is needed."

He took a step forward as he spoke, a quick, halting step, and Pixie looking on, exclaimed sharply—

"*The Runkle! Stanor's Runkle! It is You!*"

The stranger looked down sharply, his dark brows puckering in astonishment.

"I am Stephen Glynn—'The Runkle,' as my nephew is pleased to call me. But you—you cannot be—"

Pixie nodded vehemently.

"I *am*!—Pixie O'Shaughnessy. Going to be your niece. I made Stanor write to tell you.—"

They seated themselves on the bench under the oak-tree, and turning, faced each other in a long, curious silence, during which each face assumed a puzzled expression.

"But you are younger than I expected!" cried Pixie.

"That is exactly what I was on the point of saying to *you*," returned Mr Glynn.

"And yet we know exactly how old we both are—twenty and thirty-five!" Pixie continued volubly. "But you know how it is with young men—they have no patience to explain! You'd be amused if you could see the image I'd made of you in my own mind. I expect 'twas the same with yourself?"

"It was," agreed Mr Glynn, and for a moment imagined that his disappointment was his own secret—only for a moment, however, then Pixie tilted her head at him with a sideways nod of comprehension.

"Knowing, of course, that I was a sister of the beautiful Mrs Hilliard! No wonder you are disappointed!" The eyes smiled sympathy at him, and the wide lips parted in the friendliest of smiles. "You'll like me better when you know me!"

"I—I am quite sure," stammered Mr Glynn, and then drew himself up suddenly, as if doubtful if agreement were altogether polite under the circumstances. Once more his lips twitched, and as their eyes met he and Pixie collapsed together into an irresistible laugh. He laughed well, a rare and charming accomplishment, and Pixie regarded him with benign approval.

"Quite romantic, isn't it? The noble kinsman journeying in state to demand the hand of the charming maid, falls ill of the perils of the way, and encounters a simple cottage maid gathering flowers, who succours the stranger in distress. Their identity is then revealed. ... I *do* love romances!" cried Pixie gushingly.

"And it's much nicer having an interview out here than in a stuffy room ... Please, Mr Kinsman—begin!"

He frowned, bit at his under lip, and moved restlessly on the seat, glancing once and again at the girl's bright, unclouded face.

"I'm afraid," he began slowly, "that the matter is not altogether as simple as you suppose. Stanor is not in a position to marry without my consent. I think he has not sufficiently appreciated this fact. If he had consulted me in the first instance I should have endeavoured to prevent—"

She turned her eyes upon him like a frightened child. There was no trace of anger, nor wounded pride—those he could have faced with ease—but the simple shock of the young face smote on his heart.

"I had not seen you, remember!" he cried quickly. "My decision had no personal element. I object at this stage to Stanor becoming engaged to—anybody. He has, no doubt, explained to you our relationship. His parents being dead, I made myself responsible for his training. He may have explained to you also my wish that for a few years he should be free to enjoy his youth without any sense of responsibility?"

Pixie nodded gravely.

"He has. I understood. You had missed those years yourself, and knew they could never come back, so you gave them to him as a gift—young, happy years without a care, that he could treasure up in his mind and remember all his life. 'Twas a big gift! Stanor, and I are grateful to you—"

Stephen Glynn looked at her: a long, thoughtful glance. The programme which he had mapped out for his nephew had been unusual enough to attract much notice. He had been alternately annoyed and amused by the criticism of his neighbours, all of whom seemed incapable of understanding his real motives. It seemed a strange thing that it should be reserved for this slip of a girl to see into his inmost heart. He was touched and impressed, but that "Stanor and I" hardened him to his task.

"Thank you. You *do* understand. At the moment Stanor may perhaps be inclined to question the wisdom of my programme, but I think in after years he will, as you say, look back. The fact remains, however, that he has not yet tackled the real business of life. He has had, with my concurrence, plenty of change and

variety, which I believe in the end will prove of service in his life's work, and he has stood the test. Many young fellows of his age would have abused their opportunities. He has not done so. My only disappointment has been that he has developed no definite taste, but has been content to flit from one fancy to the next, always carried away by the latest novelty on the horizon."

Once again she tilted her head and scanned him with her wide, clear eyes.

"You mean *Me*?" she said quickly. "I'm the 'Latest Novelty!' You mean that he'll change about me, too? Isn't that what you mean?"

"My dear—Miss O'Shaughnessy," (incredible though it appeared, Stephen had been on the verge of saying "Pixie," pure and simple) "you leap too hastily to conclusions. I am afraid I must appear an odious person! Believe me, I had no intention of rushing into the very heart of this matter as we have done. My plan was to call upon your sister and explain to her my position—"

"'Tis not my sister's business, 'tis mine," interrupted Pixie firmly. "And it would be a waste of time talking to her, for she'd agree with every word you said. They don't *want* me to be engaged. They think I'm too young. If you have anything to say, say it to *Me*. *I'm* the person to be convinced."

She settled herself more comfortably as she spoke, turning towards him with one arm resting on the back of the bench, and her head leaning against the upturned hand. The sun shone on her face through the flickering branches. No, she was not pretty; not in the least the sort of girl Stanor was accustomed to fancy. Yet there was something extraordinarily attractive about the little face, with its clear eyes, its wide, generous mouth, its vivacity of expression. Already, after a bare ten minutes' acquaintance, Stephen Glynn so shrank from the prospect of hurting Pixie O'Shaughnessy that it required an effort to keep an unflinching front.

"I agree with your people," he said resolutely, "that you and Stanor are too young, and that this matter has been settled too hastily. Apart from that, I should object to any engagement until he has proved his ability to work for a wife. I have a position in view for him in a large mercantile house in New York. After a couple of years' experience there he would come back to the London house, and, if his work justified it, I am prepared to buy him a partnership in the firm. He would then be his own

master, free to do as he chose, but for these two years he must be free, with no other responsibility than this work."

"You think," queried Pixie slowly, "that I should interfere ... that he would do his work better without me?"

"It's not a question of thinking, Miss O'Shaughnessy. I am not content to think. I want to make *sure* that Stanor will settle seriously to work and keep in the same mind. He is a good fellow, a dear fellow, but, hitherto at least, he has not been stable."

"He has never been engaged before?"

"Not actually. I have been forewarned in time to prevent matters reaching that length. Twice over—"

A small hand waved imperiously for silence.

"I don't *think*," said Pixie sternly, "that you have any right to tell me things like that. If Stanor wants me to know, he can tell me himself. It's his affair. I am not at all curious." She drew a fluttering breath, and stared down at the ground, and a silence followed during which Stephen was denouncing himself as a hard-hearted tyrant, when suddenly a minute voice spoke in his ear—

"Were they—*pretty*?"

It was impossible to resist the smile which twitched at his lips. Unpleasant as was the nature of his errand, he, the most unsmiling of men, had already twice over been moved to merriment. Stephen was reflecting on the incongruity of the fact, when Pixie again answered his unspoken retort.

"It's not curiosity, it's interest. *Quite* a different thing! And even if they *were*, it's much more serious when a man cares for a girl for her—er—mental attractions, because they go on getting better, instead of fading away like a pretty face. It's very difficult to know what is right. ... I've promised Stanor, and he has promised me, and it seems a poor way of showing that you know your own mind, to break your word at the beginning!"

"I don't ask you to break your word, Miss O'Shaughnessy; only to hold it in abeyance. I am speaking in Stanor's interests, which we have equally at heart. I know his character—forgive me!—better than you can do, and I am asking you to help me in arranging a probation which I *know* to be wise under the

circumstances. Let him go to New York a free man; let him work and show his mettle, and at the end of two years, if you are both of the same mind, I will give you every help in my power: but meantime there must be no engagement, no *tie*, no regular correspondence. You must both be perfectly free. I am sorry to appear hard-hearted, but these are my conditions, and I can't see my way to alter them."

"Well—why not?" cried Pixie unexpectedly. "What's two years? They'll pass in no time. And men hate writing. Stanor will be relieved not to have to bother about the mails. He can do without letters. He will know that I am waiting." She held out her hand with a sudden, radiant smile. "And *you* will be pleased! It is the least we can do to consider your wishes. If I persuade Stanor—if I send him away alone to work," the small fingers tightened ingratiatingly over his, "*you will* like me, won't you? You will think of me as a real niece?"

Stephen Glynn's deep blue eyes stared deeply into hers. He did not deliberately intend to put his thoughts into speech; if he had given himself a moment to think he would certainly not have done so, but so strong was the mental conviction that the words seemed to form themselves without his volition.

"You don't love him! You could not face a separation so easily if you loved him as you should..."

For the first time a flash of real anger showed itself on Pixie's face. Her features hardened; the child disappeared and he caught a glimpse of the woman that was to be.

"What right have you to say that?" she asked deeply. "You prove to me that it would be for Stanor's good to wait, and then say I cannot love him because I agree! *You* love him, yet you can hurt him and bring him disappointment when you feel it is right. I understood that, so I was not angry, but in return you might understand *me*!"

"Forgive me!" cried Stephen. "I should not have said it. You deserved a better return for your kindness. I suppose I must seem very illogical, but it did not occur to me that the two cases were on a parallel. The love of a *fiancée* is not as a rule as well balanced as that of an uncle, Miss O'Shaughnessy!"

"It *ought* to be," asserted Pixie. "It ought to be everything that another love is, and more! A man's future wife ought to be the person of all others to be reasonable, and unselfish, and logical

where he is concerned, even if it means separation for a *dozen* years."

No answer. Stephen gazed blankly into space as if unconscious of her words.

"*Oughtn't* she?"

"Er—theoretically, Miss O'Shaughnessy, she *ought*!"

"Very well, then. I am proud that I *am*, and so ought you to be, too. ... It's strange how I'm misunderstood! My family say the same thing—Esmeralda, Geoffrey, Stanor himself, and it hurts, for no one before has ever doubted if I could love..." She was silent for a minute, twisting her fingers together in restless fashion, then looking suddenly into his face she asked: "What do you know about it to be so sure? Have *you* ever been in love?"

Stephen flushed.

"Never. No. I was— My accident cut me off from all such things."

"What a pity! She would have helped you through." She smiled into his eyes with a beautiful sweetness. "Well, Mr Glynn, if I am too reasonable to please you, perhaps Stanor will make up for it. You mayn't find it so easy to influence *him*."

"I'm sure of that. I look forward to a stiff time, but if you are on my side we shall bring him round. Now perhaps I had better continue my way to the house and see Mrs Hilliard. This is pre-eminently your business, as you say, but still—"

"She'll expect it! Yes—" Pixie rose to her feet with an air of depression—"and she'll *crow*! They'll *all* crow! It's what they wanted, and when you come and lay down an ultimatum, they'll rejoice and triumph." Her small face assumed an aspect of acute dejection. "That's the worst of being the youngest. ... It's a trying thing when your family insist on sitting in committees about your own affairs, when you understand them so much better yourself. I'm not even supposed to understand the feelings of my own heart without a sister to translate them for me. Shouldn't you think, now, a girl of twenty—nearly twenty-one—is old enough to know that?"

"I don't think it is a foregone conclusion. More things than years go to the formation of character, Miss O'Shaughnessy, and if

you will allow me to say so, you seem to me very young for your age."

"I always was," sighed Pixie sadly. "They've said that all my life. Some people always *are* young, and some are old. There was a girl at school, middle-aged at thirteen, poor creature, and had been from her birth. My sister Bridgie will never be more than seventeen if she lives to a hundred, and I mean myself to stick at twenty. It doesn't mean trying to look younger than you are, or being ashamed of your age, and silly, and frivolous: it's just keeping your *heart* young!"

The man, who was young in years and old in heart, looked down at the girl with a very sad smile. She spoke as if it were such an easy thing to do: he knew by bitter experience that under such circumstances as his own it was of all tasks the most difficult. To stand aside during the best years; to see the tide of life rush by, and have no part in the great enterprise; and then to regain his powers when youth had passed, and the keen savour of youth had died down into a dull indifference; to be dependent for love on the careless affection of a lad,—how was it possible for a man to keep his heart warm in such circumstances as these?

"Life has been kind to you," he answered dryly, and Pixie flung him a quick retort—

"I have been kind to *it*! If I'd chosen I might have found it hard enough. We were always poor. I never remember a time when I hadn't to pretend and make up, because it was impossible to get what I wanted. Then I was sent to school, and I hated going, and my father died when I was away, and they told me the news with not a soul belonging to me anywhere near, and I loved my father *far* more than other girls love theirs! ... Then we left Knock. ... If *you'd* lived in a castle, and gone to a villa in a street, with a parlour in front and a dining-room behind looking out on the kitchen wall, *you* wouldn't talk about life being kind—!

"I was in France for years being educated, and not able to repine because it was a friend and she'd taken me cheaply. Perhaps you'd say that was luck, and an advantage, and it *was*, but all the same it's hard on a young thing to have to enjoy herself in a foreign language, and spend the holidays with a maiden lady and a snuffy old *Père*, because there wasn't enough money to come home. Yes," concluded Pixie, with a smirk of satisfaction, "I've had my trials, and now I'm to be

crossed in love, and have my young lover rent from me. ... You couldn't have the audacity to call life easy after that!"

Stephen tried valiantly to look sympathetic, but it was useless; he was obliged to smile, and Pixie smiled with him, adding cheerily—

"Anyway, it's living! ... And I do love it when things happen. It's so *dreadfully* interesting to be alive."

The man who was old before his time looked down upon the girl with a wistful glance. Small as she was, insignificant as she had appeared at first sight, he had never seen any one more intensely, vitally alive. Her tiny feet skimmed the ground, her tiny head reared itself jauntily on the slender neck, the brilliance of her smile, the embracing kindliness of her glance more than compensated for the plainness of her features. Like most people who made the acquaintance of Pixie O'Shaughnessy, Stephen Glynn was already beginning to fall under her spell and marvel at the blindness of his first impression. She was *not* plain; she was *not* insignificant; she was, on the contrary, unusually fascinating and attractive!

"But she does not love him," Stephen repeated to himself. "She does not know what love means. When she does—when she has grown into a woman, and understands—what a wife, what a companion she will make!"

Chapter Seventeen.

Thinking Alike.

Pixie's prophecy that her relatives would "crow" on hearing Mr Glynn's ultimatum, was fulfilled in spirit, if not in letter.

Geoffrey and Joan Hilliard assumed their most staid and dignified airs for the important interview, referred to "my sister Patricia" with a deference worthy of a royal princess, and would have Stanor's guardian to understand that the man was not born who was worthy to be her spouse; all the same, as mortal young men went, they had nothing to say against Stanor Vaughan, and if time proved him to be in earnest, both in love and work, they would be graciously pleased to welcome him into the family. Then, the business part of the interview being ended, the ambassador was invited to stay to lunch, and

Esmeralda swept from the room, leaving the two men to a less formal colloquy over their cigarettes.

"It's a comfort to find that we think alike on this matter," began Geoffrey, holding out a match for his guest's benefit. "I have felt rather guilty about it, for Pixie was left too much to herself during our little fellow's illness. She was in trouble herself, poor little soul, and, being lonely, was no doubt unduly susceptible to sympathy. Neither my wife nor I suspected any attachment before the night of the boy's accident, and if things had gone on in a normal way I doubt if the engagement would have come off. Pixie is very young; we have hardly accustomed ourselves to the idea that she is grown-up. This is the first visit she had paid to us by herself, so that we feel responsible."

"You are uncertain of her feelings? I had the same doubt myself, but when I said as much Miss O'Shaughnessy was indignant. She insists that she does love the boy."

Geoffrey Hilliard laughed.

"It would be difficult to find the person whom Pixie does *not* love. He is handsome, and he was kind to her when she was lonely. She loves him as she loves a dozen other friends. But—"

"*But!*" repeated Stephen Glynn eloquently.

He who had missed the greatest of earthly gifts yet realised enough of its mystery to join in that eloquent protest. He smoked in silence for several moments, while his thoughts wandered backwards.

"*She would have helped you through!*"

The echo of those words rang in his ears; he heard again the musical tone of the soft Irish voice, saw again the sweet, deep glance. Strange that those words had in the very moment of utterance uprooted the conviction of years! Lying prisoner on his couch, he had been thankful, in a grim, embittered fashion which had belied the true meaning of the word, that love had not entered into his life. It would have been but another cross to bear, since no woman could be expected to be faithful to a maimed and querulous invalid. Now in a lightning flash he realised that there were women—this Irish Pixie, for example—whose love could triumphantly overcome such an ordeal. *She* would have "*helped him through*" and, supported and cheered by her influence, his recovery would doubtless have been far more speedy. He straightened himself, and said quickly—

"Miss O'Shaughnessy would make a charming wife. For Stanor's sake I could not wish anything better than that she may be ready to fulfil her promise at the end of the two years."

"There's no doubt about that," said Geoffrey gravely. "She will be ready. There's more than a grain of obstinacy in Pixie's nature—very amiable obstinacy, no doubt, but it may be just as mischievous on such occasions as the present. She has given her word and she'll stick to it, even if she recognises that she has made a mistake. We may talk, but it will have no effect. Unless your nephew himself releases her, she will feel as much bound as if they had been married in Westminster Abbey. It's the way she's made—the most faithful little creature under the sun! It will be our duty to protect her against herself, by making the young fellow understand that for her sake, almost more than his own, he must be honest, and not allow a mistaken sense of honour to urge him to repeat his proposal if his heart is not in it. He could make Pixie his wife, but he could never make her happy. The most cruel fate that could happen to that little soul would be to be married to a man who did not love her absolutely!"

Stephen Glynn nodded, his lips pressed together in grim determination.

"He shall understand. If I know Stanor, there will be no difficulty, in persuading him. He is a good lad, but it is not in him to sacrifice himself. I have been so anxious to secure him an unclouded youth that he is hardly to be blamed for putting his own interests in the foreground."

"It's a fault that many of us suffer from in the early twenties," said Geoffrey, lightly. He thought the conversation had lasted long enough, and was glad when the sound of the gong came as an interruption and he could escort his guest to the dining-room, where the two ladies were already waiting.

Luncheon was a cheerful meal despite the somewhat difficult position of the diners, and Stephen Glynn felt the pang of the lonely as he absorbed the atmosphere of love and sympathy. The beautiful hostess looked tired and worn, but her eyes brightened as she looked at her husband, and, in a quiet, unostentatious fashion, he watched incessantly over her comfort. It was easy to see that the trial through which this husband and wife had passed had but riveted the bond between them and brought them into closest sympathy, while the little sister comported herself with a brisk cheeriness which was as far as possible removed from the attitude of the proverbial

damsel crossed in love. The time passed so pleasantly that the visitor was unfeignedly sorry when it was time to make his farewells.

Pixie ran upstairs for the small son and heir, who had by now returned home, and in her absence Stephen exchanged a few last words with Esmeralda.

"I am immensely relieved and thankful that you and your husband feel with me in this matter. And Miss O'Shaughnessy has been wonderfully forgiving! She does not appear to bear me any rancour."

Esmeralda gave a short, impatient laugh.

"*Rancour! Pixie!* You know very little of my sister, Mr Glynn, to suggest such a possibility. She is incapable of rancour!"

Pixie returned at this moment, leading Geoff by the hand, and when the great car glided up to the door, she and the boy went out together to see the last of the departing guest. Stephen stepped haltingly into the car, and leaned over the side to wave his own farewells. Pixie smiled, and waved in reply, and the sun shone down on her uncovered face. Stephen would have been thankful if he could have carried away that picture as a last impression, but as the car moved slowly from the door, she stepped back into the shadow of the porch, and he caught a last glimpse of her standing there, gazing after him with a grave, fixed gaze.

Chapter Eighteen.

"I will be True."

Stephen Glynn's dreaded interview with his nephew was a typical example of the unexpectedness of events, for instead of the indignant opposition which he had feared, his proposition was listened to in silence, and accepted with an alacrity, which was almost more disconcerting than revolt.

In truth Stanor saw in the proposal an escape from what had proved a disappointing and humiliating position. His pride had been hurt by the attitude of Pixie's relatives, and he could not imagine himself visiting at their houses with any degree of enjoyment. A dragging engagement in England would therefore

be a trying experience to all concerned, and it seemed a very good way out of the difficulty to pass the time of waiting abroad.

From his own point of view, moreover, he was relieved not to begin his business life in London, where so far he had been free to pursue his pleasures only. To be cooped up in a dull city office, while but a mile or two away his friends were taking part in the social functions of the season, would be an exasperating experience, whereas in New York he would be troubled by no such comparisons, but would find much to enjoy in the novelty of his surroundings. Two years would soon pass, and at the end he would come home to an assured position, marry Pixie, and live happily ever after.

He sat gazing thoughtfully into space, the fingers of his right hand slowly stroking his chin, a picture of handsome, young manhood, while the deep blue eyes of Stephen Glynn watched him intently from across the room. A long minute of silence; then the two pairs of eyes met, and Stanor found himself flushing with a discomfort as acute as mysterious. He straightened himself, and put a hasty question—

“What does Pixie say?”

“Miss O’Shaughnessy was—” Stephen hesitated over the word— “she seemed to think that my wishes should have weight. She will consent to anything that seems for your good. She said that two years would quickly pass.”

Stanor frowned. The thought had passed through his own brain, but no man could approve of such sentiments on the part of a *fiancée*. There was an edge of irritation in his voice—

“Of course your wishes should be considered. I don’t need any one to teach me that. I am quite willing to go to America and do my best. I shall be glad of the change, but it’s nonsense to talk of not being bound. We *are* bound! We need not correspond regularly, if you make a point of that. I don’t think much of letters in any case. Writing once a week, or once in two or three months, can make no difference. There’s only *one* thing that counts!”

Stephen assented gravely.

“Just so. From what I have seen of Miss O’Shaughnessy, I realise that her only hope of happiness is to marry a man who can give her a whole-hearted love.”

Stanor's glance held a mingling of surprise and displeasure—surprise that the Runkle should offer any opinion at all on matters sentimental; displeasure, that any one should dictate to him concerning Pixie's welfare. He switched the conversation back to more practical matters.

"When shall I start? The sooner the better. If the post is open there is no object in wasting time." His face lit up with sudden animation. "I say! Could we manage it in a fortnight, should you think? Miss Ward is sailing by the 'Louisiana,' and it would be topping if I could go by the same boat. I might wire to-day about a berth."

"Who is Miss Ward?"

"Honor Ward—an American. Awfully jolly! No end of an heiress! I've met her a good deal this year, and she was staying at the Hilliards' at the time of the accident. Awfully fond of Pixie, and a real good sort!" He laughed shortly.—"We *ought* to go out together, for we are mentally in the same boat. She had intended to stay over the summer, but ... her romance has gone wrong too!"

"Indeed!"

Stephen was not interested in Miss Ward's romance, but he made no objection to the sending of a wire to the Liverpool office of the steamship company, and before evening the berth was secured and Stanor's departure definitely dated.

"I'll spend the rest of the time with Pixie," was Stanor's first determination, but each hour that passed brought with it a recollection of some new duty which must needs be performed. One cannot leave one's native land, even for a couple of years, without a goodly amount of preparation and leave-taking, and the time allotted to Pixie dwindled down to a few hasty visits of a few hours' duration, when the lovers sat together in the peacock walk, and talked, and built castles in the air, and laughed, and sighed, and occasionally indulged in a little, mild sparring, as very youthful lovers are apt to do.

"I must say you are uncommonly complacent about my going! A fellow hardly expects the girl he's engaged to, to be in such uproarious spirits just on the eve of their separation," Stanor would grumble suddenly at the end of one of his *fiancée's* mirthful sallies, whereupon Pixie, her vanity hurt by his want of appreciation, would snap out a quick retort.

"If I'm sad you want me to be glad, and if I'm glad you're annoyed that I'm not sad! There's no pleasing you! You ought to be thankful that I'm so strong and self-controlled. ... Would it make it easier; if I were hanging round your neck in hysterics?"

"Oh, bar hysterics! But a tear or two now and then... Suppose it was Bridgie who was going instead of me?—would you be as strong and self-controlled?"

"If Bridgie were going I'd ... I'd jump—" In the midst of her passionate declaration Pixie drew herself up, shot a frightened glance, and concluded lamely, "I'd ... be very much distressed!"

"That's not what you were going to say. You were going to say that you'd jump into the water and swim after her, or some such nonsense. You can be perfectly cool and calm about *my going*, but when it comes to Bridgie—"

"If it'll please you better, I'll begin to howl this minute! I don't often, but when I do, it seems as if I could never stop. I *thought*," Pixie added reproachfully, "when a girl was engaged the man thought her perfect, and everything she did, and she sat listening while he sang her praises from morn to night. But *you* find fault—"

"I don't call it finding fault to wish you would show more feeling! It's the best sort of compliment, if you could only see it."

"I like my compliments undiluted, not wrapped up in reproaches, like powder in jam. Besides, you're fairly complacent yourself! I heard you telling Geoffrey that you expected to have a real good time."

"And suppose I did? What about that? Would you prefer me to be lonely, and miserable?"

"Oh *dear!*" cried Pixie poignantly; "we're quarrelling! Whose fault was it? Was it mine? I'm sorry, Stanor. *Don't* let's quarrel! I want you to be happy. Could I love you if I didn't do that? I want it more than anything else. Honor is coming to-morrow, and I shall ask her to look after you for me. She knows so many people, and is so rich that she has the power to help. She will be glad to have you so near. *Why* is she going home so *soon*, Stanor? I thought—"

"So did we all, but it's fallen through somehow. I met Carr in town looking the picture of woe, but, naturally, he didn't

vouchsafe any explanation. Honor will probably unburden herself to you to-morrow."

"She will. If she doesn't I shall ask her," said Pixie calmly. "I'm crossed in love myself, so I can understand. It's no use trying to sympathise till you've had a taste of the trouble yourself. Has it ever occurred to you to notice the mad ways most people set about sympathising? Sticking needles all over you while they're trying to be kind. Sympathising is an art, you know, and you have to adapt it to each person. Some like a little and some like a lot, and some like cheering up, and others want you to cry with them and make the worst of everything, and then it's off their minds and they perk up. Bridgie and I used to think sometimes of hiring ourselves out as professional sympathisers, for there seems such a lack of people who can do it properly."

"Suppose you give me a demonstration now! You haven't been too generous in that respect, Pixie."

Pixie looked at him, her head on one side, her eyes very intent and serious.

"You don't *need* it," she said simply, and Stanor looked hurt and discomfited, and cast about in his mind for a convincing retort which should prove beyond doubt the pathos of his position, failed to find it, and acknowledged unwillingly to himself that as a matter of fact he *was* very well satisfied with the way in which things were going. Pixie was right—she usually *was* right; it might, perhaps, be more agreeable if on occasions she could be judiciously blind! He adopted the pained and dignified air which experience had taught him was the surest method of softening Pixie's heart, and in less than a minute she was hanging on his arm and contradicting all her former statements.

Stanor was very much in love as he travelled back to town that day, and the two years of waiting seemed unbearably long. Perhaps, if he got on unusually well, the Runkle might be induced to shorten the probation. He would sound him at the end of the first year.

The next day Honor Ward made a farewell visit to the Hall, and took lunch with the family in the panelled dining-room, where she had joined in many merry gatherings a few weeks before. Pixie saw the brown eyes flash a quick glance at the place which had been allotted to Robert Carr, but except for that glance there was no sign of anything unusual in either looks or manner. Honor was as neat, as composed, as assured in manner as in her happiest moments, and the flow of her

conversation was in no wise moderated. Her hurried departure was explained by a casual "I guessed I'd better," which Mr and Mrs Hilliard accepted as sufficient reason for a girl who had no ties, and more money than she knew how to use. Even Pixie's lynx-eyes failed to descry any sign of heart-break. But when the meal was over and the two girls retired upstairs for a private chat, Honor's jaunty manners fell from her like a cloak, and she crouched in a corner of the sofa, looking suddenly tired and worn. For the moment, however, it was not of her own affairs that she elected to speak.

"Pat-ricia," she began suddenly, turning her honey-coloured eyes on her friend's face with a penetrating gaze, "I guess this is about the last real talk you and I are going to get for a good long spell. There's no time for fluttering round the point. What I've got in my mind I'm going to say! What in the land made you get engaged to Stanor Vaughan?"

"Because he asked me, of course!" replied Pixie readily, and the American girl gave a shrug of impatience.

"If another man had asked you, then, it would have been just the same. You would have accepted him for, the same reason!"

Pixie's head reared proudly; her eyes sent out a flash.

"That's horrid, and you *meant* it to be! I shan't answer your questions if you're going to be rude."

"I'm not rude, Patricia O'Shaughnessy. You're a real sweet girl, and I want you should be as happy as you deserve, which you certainly won't be if you don't take the trouble to understand your own heart. What's all this nonsense about being bound and not bound, and waiting for two years without writing, he on one side of the ocean, and you on another? I can understand an old uncle proposing it—it's just the sort of scheme an old uncle *would* propose—but it won't work out, Patricia, you take my word for that!"

"Thank you, my dear, I prefer to take my own; and he's *not* old. He has the most beautiful eyes you ever beheld. What do you suppose Stanor would say if he knew you were talking to me like this?"

"I'm not saying a word against Stanor! Who could say a word against such an elegant creature? He's been a good friend to me, and he's going to make a first-rate man when he gets to work, and has something to think about besides his beautiful

self. America'll knock the nonsense out of him. At the end of two years, it will be another man who comes home, a *man* instead of a boy, just as you will probably be a woman instead of a girl. It's the most critical time in life, when that change is taking place, and you'd better believe I know what I'm talking about. If I were in your place I'd move mountains, Patricia, if mountains had to be moved, but I'd make sure that the man I loved didn't go through it apart from me!"

"But if the mountain happened to be an uncle, and the uncle had done everything, and was willing to go on doing everything, and was older and wiser, and knew better than you? Oh, dearie me," concluded Pixie impatiently, "*everybody* seems against me! I'm lectured and thwarted on every side, I've not been brought up to it, and it's most depressing. And it's not a bit of good, either; it's my own life, and I shall do as I like. And what about yourself, me dear? You are very brave about lecturing me. Suppose *I* take a turn! Why are you going back to America and leaving Robert Carr behind? What have you been doing to him?"

"I asked him to marry me, and he refused."

Pixie sat stunned with surprise and consternation. Honor's voice had been flat and level as usual, not a break or quiver had broken its flow, but there was a pallor round the lips, a sudden sharpening of the features, which spoke eloquently enough, and smote the hearer to the heart.

"Oh, me dear, forgive me!" she cried deeply. "I'm ashamed. Don't say any more. I'd no right to ask."

"I meant to tell you. I'd have told you in any case. You guessed how it was when we were here. You can't be in love like that and *not* show it.—I thought of him all day; I dreamt of him all night ... when he was out of the room I was wretched; when he came in I knew it by instinct; before I could see him I knew it! In a crowded room I could hear every word he said, see every movement. ... When I was sitting alone, and heard his voice in the distance, my heart leapt—it made me quite faint. I *loved* him, Pixie!"

Pixie sat staring with startled gaze. She did not speak, and for a moment it seemed that her thoughts had wandered from the story on hand, for her eyes had an *inward* look, as though she were puzzling out a problem which concerned herself alone. She started slightly as Honor again began to speak, and straightened herself with a quick air of attention.

"Sometimes I thought he loved me too, but he was not the sort of man who would choose to marry an heiress. My money stood between us. So I ... I tried to make it easier by showing him ... how I felt. When we went back to London he said good-bye, and refused my invitations, but I met him by accident, and," she straightened herself with a gesture of pride, "I am not ashamed of what I did. It would have been folly to sacrifice happiness for the sake of a convention ... I *asked* him—"

"And?"

"*He cared!*" Honor said softly. "I had my hour, Pixie, but it was *only* an hour, for at the end we got to business, and that wrecked it all. I've told you about my factory. Over here in England, when people have looked at me through monocles, there *have* been times when I've been ashamed of pickles, but at home I'm proud! Father started as a working lad, and built up that great business, brick by brick. Three thousand 'hands' are employed in the factory, but they were never 'hands' to him, Patricia, they were *souls*! He'd been a working man himself, and there was not one thing in their lives he didn't know and understand. One of the first things I can remember, right away back in my childhood, is being taken to a window to see those men stream past, and being told they were my friends and that I was to take care of them. He had no airs, my pappa; he never gave himself frills, or pretended to be anything different from what he was—there was only one thing he was proud of, and that was that his men were the happiest and most contented in the States. When he died he left me more than his money, he left me his *men*!"

Honor paused, her eyes bright with suppressed feeling, and Pixie, keen as ever to appreciate an emotional situation, drew a fluttering breath.

"Yes, yes! How beautiful! How fine! All those lives ... Honor, aren't you proud?"

"I've told you before, my dear. The best part of me is proud and glad, but we're pretty complex creatures, and I guess a big duty is bound to come up against a pleasure now and then. At the moment I was speaking of, it was one man against three thousand, and the one man weighed down the scale."

"But ... but I don't understand." Pixie puckered her brows in bewilderment. "Why couldn't you have both?"

"I thought I could, Patricia. I calculated, as my work was full-fledged, and his had hardly begun, that he would be willing to come over with me. It's a pretty stiff proposition for a woman to run a big show like that, and I'd have been glad of help. *He* allowed I'd have to sell up and keep house for him in England, and make a splash among the big-wigs to help him in his career. He put it as politely as he knew how, but he made me understand that it was beneath his dignity to live in America and work in pickles, and he guessed if I sold out I could find a buyer who would look after the men as well as or better than I did myself. So—" she waved her small white hands—"there we were! He wouldn't, and I couldn't! That's the truth, Patricia. I could *not*! I don't dispute that another person might not manage as well as I, that's not the question. It's my work, it's my responsibility; those men were left to *me*, and I can't desert. So the dream's over, my dear, and I'm going back to real hard life."

Pixie nodded, the big tears standing in her eyes.

"I should have done the same. He didn't love you *enough*."

Honor gave a quivering laugh.

"He said the same of me. Couldn't seem to see any difference between the two 'give-ups'; but there *is* a difference, Patricia. Well, my dear, that's the end of it. We said good-bye, and there's no reason why we should meet again. ... Our lives lie in different places, and it's no use trying to join them."

"Honor, dear, are you very unhappy?"

Honor's neat little features puckered in a grimace.

"I wouldn't go so far as to say I feel exactly gay, Patricia, but don't you worry about me. I'll come up smiling. You wouldn't have me pine for the sake of a man who wouldn't have me when he got the chance? I guess Honor P Ward has too much grit for that!"

Pixie nodded slowly.

"But you mustn't be too hard on him, Honor—It's natural to want to live in one's own country, and he loves *his* work just as you do yours. He'll be a judge some day—chins like that always *do* succeed—and ambition means so much to a man. You might have been pleased for your own sake; but would you have

thought more of *him* as a *man* if he'd thrown it all up and lived on your pickles?"

Honor brought her eyebrows together in a frown.

"Now, Pixie O'Shaughnessy, don't you go taking his part! I guess I've got about as much sense of justice as most, and in a few months' time I'll see the matter in its right light, but for the moment I'm injured, and I *choose* to feel injured; and I expect my friends to feel injured too. I've offered myself to an Englishman, and he's refused to have me. There's no getting away from that fact, and it's not a soothing experience for a free-born American. I'm through with Englishmen from this time forth!"

"Except Stanor! Be kind to Stanor. He's always liked you, Honor, and he knows no one in America. Promise me to be kind to Stanor, and see him as often as you can!"

Honor's brown eyes searched Pixie's face with a curious glance. Then, rising from her chair, she crossed the room and kissed her warmly upon the cheek.

"Yes, I'll look after him. I'll do anything you want, and nothing you *don't* want. You can trust me, my dear. Remember that, won't you? You're a real sweet thing, Patricia!"

Pixie laughed with characteristic complacency.

"Yes; but why especially at this moment? I always *am*, aren't I? And how superfluous, me dear, to talk of trust? What have I got to trust?"

A fortnight later Geoffrey and Joan Hilliard, Stephen Glynn, and Pixie journeyed to Liverpool to see the last of the travellers. The little party stood together on the deck of the great vessel, surrounded on every side by surge and bustle, but silent themselves with the silence which falls when the heart is full. Travelling down to Liverpool they had been quite a merry party, and there had been no effort in keeping the conversation afloat; but the last moments sealed their lips. Honor drew a few yards apart with the elderly, kindly-faced maid who was her faithful attendant; Stephen Glynn and the Hilliards strolled away in an opposite direction. Pixie and her lover stood alone.

"Well, little girl... this is good-bye! Don't forget me, darling..."

Pixie gulped.

"Take care of yourself, Stanor. Be happy! ... I want you to be happy."

"I shall be wretched!" said Stanor hotly. "I'm leaving you. Oh! Pixie—" He broke off suddenly as the last bell sounded its warning note, and bent to kiss her lips; "Good-bye, my little love!"

The tears poured down Pixie's face as she turned aside, and Geoffrey Hilliard led her tenderly down the gangway on to the landing-stage, where they stood together, tightly jammed in the crowd which watched the great steamer slowly move into the stream. Stanor and Honor were standing together leaning over the towering hull; their faces were pale, but they were smiling bravely, and Pixie wiped away her own tears and waved an answering hand. Esmeralda was holding her hand in a tender pressure; Geoffrey on one side, and Stephen Glynn on the other were regarding her with anxious solicitude. She smiled back with tremulous gratitude and gripped Esmeralda's hand. Though Stanor was going, there was still much left, so many people to care and be kind.

The great vessel quivered and moved slowly forward. Honor drew a little white handkerchief from her bag and waved it in the air; on all sides the action was repeated, accompanied by cries of farewell mingled with sounds of distress. Pixie caught the sound of a sob, and craned forward to look in the face of a girl about her own age who stood on the other side of Stephen Glynn. She wore a small, close-fitting cap, which left her face fully exposed as it strained towards that moving deck, and on the small white features was printed a very extremity of anguish. She was not crying; her glazed eyes showed no trace of tears, she seemed unconscious of the deep sobs which issued from her lips; every nerve, every power was concentrated in the one effort to behold to the last possible moment one beloved face. Instinctively Pixie's eyes followed those of the girl's, and beheld a man's face gazing back, haggard, a-quiver, almost contorted with suffering. The story was plain to read. They also were lovers—this man and this girl. They also were facing years of separation, and the moment of parting held for them the bitterness of death. Pixie O'Shaughnessy glanced from one to the other, and then thoughtfully, deliberately along the deck to the spot where stood her own lover, handsome Stanor, bending his head to overhear a remark from Honor, stroking his blonde moustache. He looked dejected, depressed; but compared with the depth of emotion on the other man's face, such meagre

expressions faded into nothingness. The moment during which she gazed at his face held for Pixie the significance of years; then once more her eyes returned to the girl by her side...

With every minute now the great vessel was slipping farther and farther from the stage; the faces of her passengers would soon cease to be distinguishable; in a few minutes they would be lost to sight, yet Pixie's gaze remained riveted on the girl by her side, and on her own face was printed a mute dismay which one onlooker at least was quick to read.

"*She understands!*" Stephen Glynn said to himself. "That girl's face has been an object lesson stronger than any words. She understands the difference."

A moment later he met Pixie's eyes, and realised afresh the truth of his diagnosis; but she drew herself up with a sort of defiance, and turned sharply aside.

In the train returning to town Pixie sat mute and pallid, and was waited upon assiduously by her sister and brother. To them it seemed natural enough that the poor child should collapse after the strain of parting. Only one person understood the deepest reason of her distress. He offered none of the conventional words of sympathy, and forebore to echo Esmeralda's rosy pictures of the future. It brought another pang to Pixie's sore heart to realise that he *understood*. "But I will be true," she repeated to herself with insistent energy; "I will be true. I have given my word." She felt very tired and spent as she lay back in the corner of her cushioned seat. On heart and brain was an unaccustomed weight; her very limbs felt heavy and inert, as if the motive power had failed. Virtue had gone out of her. At the sight of that anguished face, the years of Pixie's untroubled girlhood had come to an end. Henceforth she was a woman, carrying her own burden. "But I will be true," she repeated gallantly; "I will be true!"

Chapter Nineteen.

Pixie seeks Advice.

A tall young man lay stretched upon a narrow bed which filled an entire wall of the one and only sitting-room in a diminutive

London flat. On the wall opposite was a fireplace and a small sideboard; against the third wall stood a couple of upright chairs. In the centre of the room stood a table. A wicker arm-chair did duty for an invalid tray, and held a selection of pipes, books, and writing materials, also a bottle of medicine, and a plate of unappetising biscuits.

The young man took up one of the biscuits, nibbled a crumb from the edge, and aimed the remainder violently at a picture at the other end of the room. It hit, and the biscuit broke into pieces, but the glass remained intact, a result which seemed far from satisfactory to the onlooker. He fumbled impatiently for matches with which to light his pipe, touched the box with the tips of his outstretched fingers, and jerked it impatiently, whereupon it rolled on to the floor to a spot just a couple of inches beyond the utmost stretch of his arm. There it lay—obvious and aggravating, tempting, baffling, inaccessible. Pipe and tobacco lay at hand to supply the soothing which he so sorely needed at the end of a lonely, suffering day, and for the want of that box they might as well have been a mile away! A bell was within reach, but what use to ring that when no one was near to hear? The slovenly woman who called herself a working housekeeper found it necessary to sally forth each afternoon on long shopping expeditions, and during her absence her master had to fend for himself as best he might.

Dislocation of the knee was the young man's malady, just a sharp, swift rush at cricket, a slip on the dry grass, and Pat O'Shaughnessy shuddered every time he thought of the hours and days which followed that fall. He had asked to be taken home, for the tiny flat was a new possession, and as such dear to his heart. And to his home they carried him, and there he had lain already for longer than he cared to think. He had progressed to the point when he had been able to dismiss an excellent but uncongenial nurse, and manage with an hour's assistance morning and night; and what with reading the newspapers, smoking his pipe, and writing an occasional letter the first part of the day passed quickly enough.

Lunch was served at one o'clock on a papier-maché tray spread with a crumpled tray cloth. It was a tepid, tasteless, unappetising meal, for the working housekeeper knew neither how to work nor to cook, and Pat invariably sent it away almost untasted; yet every day he looked forward afresh to the advent of one o'clock and the appearance of the tray. It was something to happen, something to do, a change from the reading, of which he was already getting tired. But, after lunch, after he

had wakened from the short siesta; and realised that it was not yet three o'clock, and that six, seven hours still remained to be lived through before he could reasonably hope to settle for the night—that was a dreary time indeed, and Pat, whose interests lay all outdoors, knew no means of lightening it.

For the first week of his confinement Pat had had a string of visitors. The members of his cricket team had appeared to express sympathy and encouragement; some of the men against whom he had been playing had also put in an appearance; "fellows" had come up from "the office," but in the busy life of London a man who goes *on* being ill is apt to find himself left alone before many weeks have passed. There was only one man who never failed to put in an appearance at some hour of the day, and on that man's coming Pat O'Shaughnessy this afternoon concentrated every power in his possession.

"They say if you wish hard enough you can make a fellow do what you like. If there's any truth in it, Glynn ought to come along pretty soon. How am I going to lie here all afternoon and stare at those miserable matches? That wretched woman might be buying the town ... wish to goodness she'd fetch something fit to eat. If that doctor fellow won't tell me to-morrow how much longer I have to lie here, I'll—I'll get up and walk, just to spite him!" Pat jerked defiantly and immediately gave a groan of pain. Not much chance of walking yet awhile!

He wriggled to the edge of the sofa, and made another unsuccessful stretch for the matchbox, but those baffling two inches refused to be mastered. Pat looked around in a desperate search for help, seized a biscuit, and aimed it carefully for the farther edge of the box, which, hit at the right angle, might perhaps have been twitched nearer to the sofa, but though Pat had considerable skill in the art of throwing, he had no luck this afternoon. Biscuit after biscuit was hurled with increasing violence, as temper suffered from the strain of failure, and each time the matchbox jumped still farther *away*, while another shower of biscuit crumbs bespattered the carpet. Then at last when the plate was emptied, and the last hope gone, deliverance came at the sound of the opening of the front door, and a quick, well-known whistle. Glynn! No one else knew the secret of the hidden key. Pat halloed loudly in response, and the next moment Stephen stood in the doorway, looking with bewildered eyes at the bespattered carpet.

"What's this? Playing Aunt Sally? Rather a wanton waste of biscuits, isn't it?"

"Try 'em, and see! Soft as dough. Give me that matchbox, Glynn, like a good soul. It fell off my chair, and I've been lying here pining for a smoke, and making pot shots of it, till I felt half mad.—If you only knew—"

Stephen Glynn *did* know. It was that knowledge which brought him regularly day by day to the little flat at the top of eighty odd stairs.

He walked across the room, his limp decidedly less in evidence through the passage of the years, reclaimed the matchbox, and seated himself on the edge of the couch.

"Light up, old fellow! It will do you good."

Pat struck the match and sucked luxuriously. There was no need to make conversation to Glynn. He was a comfortable fellow who always understood. It was good to see him sitting there, to look at his fine, grave face, and realise that boredom was over, and the happiest hour of the day begun.

"I say, Glynn, I *made* you, come! Mesmerised you. It drives a fellow crazy to be done by a couple of inches. They say if you concentrate your thoughts—"

"I arranged this morning to call at five o'clock. I should say by the look of things you had concentrated on biscuits. ... Where's that old woman?" Glynn inquired.

"Shopping. Always is. And never buys anything by the taste of the food. You should have seen my lunch! I'll be a living skeleton at this rate."

Pat spoke laughingly, but the hearer frowned, and looked quickly at the sharpened face, on which weeks of solitary confinement had left their mark.

"Why don't you round into her?"

"Daren't! Might make off and leave me in the lurch. They do, you know. Fellows have told me. Any one is better than no one at all when you are minus a leg."

"And about that letter? The time limit runs out to-morrow. You know what I threatened?"

Pat shrugged impatiently.

"You and your threats! What's the sense in worrying when it's got to *end* in worrying, and can do no good? I've told you till I'm tired—the Hilliards are abroad, Dick Victor is down with rheumatism, and Bridgie makes sure he's going to die every time his finger aches. She'd leave him if I died first, I suppose, but I wouldn't make too sure even of that. 'Twould have finished her altogether to know that I was lying here all these weeks. However!" Pat shrugged again, "you've got your way, bad luck to you! Bridgie wrote to ask me to run down over a Sunday, to cheer Victor, so there was nothing for it but to own up. She'll write me reams of advice and send embrocations. Serve you jolly well right if I rubbed them on *you* instead!"

"Fire away, I don't mind! Your muscles would be the better for a little exercise."

Stephen Glynn leaned back in his chair and looked affectionately at Pat's dark, handsome face.

Twelve months before the two men had been introduced at a dinner following a big cricket match in which Pat had distinguished himself by a fine innings.

Stephen Glynn from his seat on the grand stand had applauded with the rest of the great audience, and looking at the printed card in his hand had wondered whether by chance P.D. O'Shaughnessy was any relation of the Irish Pixie to whom Stanor Vaughan had wished to be engaged. The wonder changed to certainty a few hours later on as he was introduced to the young player, and met the gaze of his straight, dark eyes! Pat was the handsomest of the three brothers, nevertheless it was not so much of beautiful Joan Hilliard that the beholder was reminded, at this moment, as of the younger sister, who had no beauty at all, for Esmeralda's perfect features lacked the irradiation of kindness and humour which characterised Pat and Pixie alike.

Stephen Glynn was not given to sudden fancies, but Pat O'Shaughnessy walked straight into his heart at that first meeting, and during the year which followed the acquaintance so begun had ripened into intimacy. Stephen spent a great part of his time in chambers in town, where the young man became a welcome guest, and no sooner had Pat soared to the giddy height of possessing a flat of his own, and settled down as a householder, than the accident had happened which made him dependent on the visits of his friends.

Pat was aware of Stephen's connection with his family, and more especially with Pixie, but after one brief reference the subject had been buried, though Pixie herself was frequently mentioned. There was a portrait of her on Pat's mantelpiece to which Stephen's eyes often strayed during his visits to the flat. Truth to tell it was not a flattering portrait. Pixie was unfortunate so far as photography was concerned, since all her bad points were reproduced and her charm disappeared. Stephen wondered if Stanor were gazing at the same photograph in New York, and if his imagination were strong enough to supply the want. For himself he had no difficulty. So vivid was his recollection that even as he looked the set face of the photograph seemed to flash into smiles...

"Well, I am glad you have given in," he said, continuing his sentence after a leisurely pause, "because my threat was real. I should certainly have written to your people if you hadn't done it yourself. You are not being properly looked after, young man. To put it bluntly, you are not having enough to eat. When do you expect that obnoxious old female to come back and make tea?"

"Deed, I've given over expecting," said Pat despondently. "Most days I'm ready to drink the teapot by the time she brings it in. It's a toss up if we *get* it at all to-day as she's gone out."

Stephen rose to his tall height and stood smiling down at the tired face.

"You shall have it, my boy. I'll make it myself. It won't be the first time. Have you any idea where the crocks live? I don't want to upset—"

Before he could complete his sentence, a thunderous knocking sounded at the front door, causing both hearers to start with astonishment. So loud, so vigorous, so long continued was the assault, that the first surprise deepened into indignation, and Pat's dark eyes sent out a threatening flash.

"This is *too* strong! Lost her key, I suppose, and expects me to crawl on all fours to let her in. You go, Glynn, and send her straight here to me! I'll give her a bit of my mind. I'm just in the mood to do it. Leaving me alone for hours and then knocking down my door—!"

Stephen Glynn crossed the floor, his face set into an alarming sternness, for his irritation against his friend's neglectful domestic had been growing for weeks, and this was the

culminating point. He seized the handle, turned it quietly, and jerked the door open with a disconcerting suddenness which had the effect of precipitating the new-comer into his arms.

"Me *dear!*" she cried rapturously, as she fell, but the same moment she was upright again, bolt upright, scorching him with disdainful glance. "It's not!—Where am I? ... They *said* it was Mr O'Shaughnessy's flat!"

"It is! It is! Pixie! Pixie! Come in, come quick! Oh, you blessed little simpleton, what's the meaning of this? You'd no business to come. There's no room for you. I'm nearly well now. There's no need—I—I— oh, *Pixie!*" and poor, tired, hungry Pat lay back weakly in his sister's arms, and came perilously near subsiding into tears. It had been hard work keeping up his pecker all these long weeks, it was so overwhelmingly home-like to see Pixie's face, and listen to her deep mellow tones...

"There's *got* to be room, me dear, for I've come to stay. How dare you be ill by yourself? It's a bad effect London has had on you to make you so close and secretive. You! Who yelled the roof down if you as much as scratched your finger! We got the note this morning—"

"Glynn made me send it. He's been worrying at me for weeks. Glynn!" Pat raised his voice to a cry. "Where are you? Come in, you beggar. It's Pixie! My sister Pixie. Come and shake hands."

Stephen and Pixie advanced to meet each other, red in the face and bashful of eye. The encounter at the door had been so momentary that she had hardly had time to recognise the pale face with the deep blue eyes, but for him the first note of her voice had been sufficient.

"I—I thought you were Pat!"

"I—I thought you were the cook."

She straightened at that, with a flash of half-resentful curiosity.

"*Why?* Am I so like her? And do you always—"

"No, I don't. Never. But to-day she was out and your brother wanted—"

"Oh, never mind, never mind!" Pat was too greedy for attention to suffer a long explanation. "What does it matter? She's a wretch, Pixie, and she goes out and leaves me to starve. That

good Samaritan was going to make tea when we heard your knock."

"I'll make it for you!" Pixie said smiling, but she seated herself by Pat's side as she spoke, and slid her hand through his arm, as though realising that for the moment her presence was the most welcome of all refreshments. She wore a smartly cut tweed coat and skirt, and a soft felt hat with a pheasant's wing, and her brown shoes looked quite preposterously small and bright. In some indefinable way she looked older and more responsible than the Pixie of two years before, and Stephen noticed the change and wondered as to its cause.

"I think I will go now," he said hastily; "your sister will look after you, O'Shaughnessy, and you will have so much to talk about. I'll come again!"

But Pat was obstinate; he insisted that his friend should stay on, and appealed to Pixie for support, which she gave with great good will.

"Please do! We'll talk the better for having an audience. Won't we now, Pat? We were always vain."

"We were!" Pat assented with unction. "Especially yourself. Even as a child you played up to the gallery." He took her hand and squeezed it tightly between his own. "Pixie, I can't believe it! It's too nice to be true. And Bridgie, what does she say? Does she approve of your coming?"

"She did one moment, and the next she didn't. She was torn in pieces, the poor darling, wanting to come to you herself, and to stay with Dick at the same time. You know what she is when Dick is ill! His temperature has only to go up one point, to have her weeping about Homes for Soldiers' Orphans, and pondering how she can get most votes. He's buried with military honours, poor Richard, every time he takes a cold. So I was firm with her, and just packed my things and came off. At my age," she straightened herself proudly, "one must assert oneself! I asked her what was the use of being twenty-two, and how she'd have liked it herself if she'd been thwarted at that age, and she gave in and packed up remedies." Pixie picked up the brown leather bag which lay on the floor, and opening it, took out the contents in turns, and laid them on the sofa. "A tonic to build up the system. Beef-juice, to ditto. Embrocation to be applied to the injured part. ... Tabloids. Home-made cake. ... Oh, that tea! I'd forgotten. I'll make it at once, and we'll eat the cake now." She jumped up and looked appealingly towards Stephen. "Will you

show me the kitchen? I don't know my way through these lordly fastnesses!"

They went out of the room together, while Pat called out an eager, "Don't be long!"

It was only a step into the tiny kitchen. In another moment Stephen and Pixie stood within its portals, and she had closed the door behind with a careful hand. Her face had sobered, and there was an anxious furrow in her forehead.

"He looks *ill*!" she said breathlessly. "Worse than I expected. He said he was getting well. Please tell me honestly—Is it *true*?"

"Perfectly true in one sense. The knee is doing well, but his general health has suffered. He has been lonely and underfed, and at the first there was considerable pain. I did my best to make him write to you before, for he is not fit to be left alone. That servant is lazy and inefficient."

Pixie glanced round the untidy room with her nose tilted high.

"'Twill be a healthful shock for her to come back and find a mistress in possession. We'll have a heart to heart talk to-morrow morning," she announced, with so quaint an assumption of severity that Stephen was obliged to laugh. She laughed with him, struggling out of her coat, and looking round daintily for a place to lay it.

"That nail on the door! There's not a clean spot. Now for the kettle! You fill it, while I rummage. What's the most unlikely place for the tea? It will be there. She's the sort of muddler who'd leave it loose among the potatoes."

"It's in the caddy. The brown box on the dresser. I've found it before."

"The caddy!" Pixie looked quite annoyed at so obvious a find. "Oh, so it is. Where's the butter then, and the bread, and the sugar? Where's the spoons? Where does she put the cloths? Rake out that bottom bar to make a draught. Does he get feverish at nights? It's a mercy I brought a cake, for I don't believe there's a *thing*. Does he take it strong?"

She was bustling about as she spoke, opening and shutting drawers, standing on tip-toe to peer over kitchen shelves, lifting the lids of dishes upon the dresser. One question succeeded fast upon another, but she did not trouble herself to wait for a reply,

and Stephen, watching with a flickering smile, was quite nonplussed when at last she paused, as if expectant of an answer.

"What strong?"

"*Tea!* What else could it be? We were talking of tea."

"I beg your pardon. So we were. Yes, he does like it strong, and there's only one set of cups, white with a gold rim. There were two left the other day, but it's quite possible they have disappeared. She is a champion breaker."

"We'll have tumblers then," Pixie said briskly. "The nicest tea I ever had was at a seaside inn where we made it ourselves in a bedroom to save the expense. Oh, *here* they are, and here's the milk. Now we shan't be long!" Then suddenly, standing before the cupboard door, and tilting her head over her shoulder, "*When did you hear from Stanor?*" she asked, in a still, altered voice which struck like a blow.

Stephen Glynn gave no outward sign of surprise, yet that sudden question had sent racing half a dozen pulses, as voicing the words in his own mind. "When did you hear from Stanor? *What* do you hear from Stanor?" The first sight of the girl's face had added intensity to the curiosity of years—a curiosity which within the last months had changed into anxiety. He hesitated before answering the simple question.

"He does not write often. We had a good deal of correspondence when he decided to stay in New York the extra six months. He seems to have acclimatised wonderfully, and to be absorbed in his work, unusually absorbed for his age."

"But that is what you wanted. You must be pleased about that," Pixie said quietly. She was arranging the cups and saucers on the tray, but she looked at him as she spoke, a straight, sweet look, which yet held so much sadness that it cut like a knife.

"Miss O'Shaughnessy," he cried impetuously, "can you forgive me? I took too much upon myself. I did it for the best, but—two years is too long. One settles down. It was a blow to me when he stayed on, for my own sake, and—"

Pixie nodded gravely.

"Yes. We were both sorry. We wanted of course to see him, but you should not blame him for loving his work. You blamed him

before because he was changeable; now he has done so well, you must be proud." She smiled at him with determined cheerfulness. "I am proud. And it is not as if it were making him ill. He finds time to play. Honor Ward often writes and she tells me—"

"Miss Ward seems an adept at play," returned Stephen dryly.

In truth, the lavishness of the entertainments which Honor had planned during the past two years had called the attention of even the English papers. Pixie had read aloud descriptions thereof in the journals in the northern town where Captain Victor was still stationed, and Bridgie listening thereto had exclaimed in horror: "Special liveries for all the men-servants just for that one evening! How wicked! All that money for a few hours, when poor children are starving, and myself wanting a velvet coat..."

At first Pixie had divined that Honor was trying to drown her sorrow in gaiety, and was even guilty of a girlish desire to "show off" before her former lover, but as the months grew into years it was impossible to read her letters and not realise that her enjoyment was real, not feigned, and that she had outgrown regret. Yes, Honor was happy; and to judge from her accounts Stanor was happy too, able even in his busiest days to spare time to join the revels, and, indeed, to help in their organisation.

"Miss Ward is an adept at play. I don't approve of these gorgeous entertainments," said Stephen, and Pixie's eyes lightened with a mischievous flash.

"Seems to me you are never satisfied! Now for myself nothing could be gorgeous enough!" She held out a brown teapot with a broken spout. "The water's boiling. Pour it in please, and don't splash! I'll carry it right in, for Pat is impatient. We mustn't keep him waiting." She waited until the pot was safely on the tray, and then added a warning: "Please don't talk about—things—before Pat. He'd worry, but I'd like your advice. Another time, perhaps, when we are alone." Her eyes met his, gravely beseeching, and he looked searchingly back.

Yes, she had suffered. It was no longer the face of a light-hearted child. Loyal as ever, Pixie would not listen to a word against her friend, but what secret was she hiding in her heart?

Chapter Twenty.

Stephen is answered.

For three days after Pixie's arrival Stephen Glynn absented himself from the flat, and on the fourth day found a stormy, welcome awaiting him.

"Ah, Glynn, is that you?" drawled Pat coldly. "Hope you haven't inconvenienced yourself, don't you know. After so many *duty* visits you are evidently thankful to be rid of me. *Pray* don't put yourself out any more on my account."

Stephen shook hands with Pixie and seated himself beside the bed with undaunted composure.

"Rubbish, old fellow! And you know it. If you have enjoyed my visits, so have I. But of course now that Miss O'Shaughnessy—"

"If it's myself that's the obstacle I can stay in my room, but if you've any pity on me, *come!*" interrupted Pixie. "My life's not worth living towards the end of the afternoon when Pat is watching the clock, and fidgeting for the ring of the bell. I'm only his sister, you see, and he wants a *man*! I'll stay out of the room if you'd rather; though I'm not saying," she concluded demurely, "that I wouldn't be glad of a change of society myself!"

"It's horribly dull for the poor girl! She doesn't like to leave me, and I don't like her going about alone. You might take her about a bit, Glynn, if you weren't so neglectful and unfriendly! Tomorrow's Sunday, and she's dying to go to the Abbey..."

"May I have the pleasure, Miss O'Shaughnessy?" cried Stephen promptly, and Pixie wrinkled her nose and said—

"You couldn't say anything else but yes, but I'll not spite myself just for the sake of seeming proud. Come and take me, and come back to lunch. You'll get a good one. I've made some changes in this establishment."

"She telegraphed to the Hilliards' housekeeper, and she sent off a kitchen-maid—a broth of a girl who romps through the work. And cooks—You wait and see! I lie and dream of the next meal!" Pat chuckled, with restored equanimity. "But if I *am* living in the lap of luxury I'm not going to be chucked by you, old fellow," he added. "The more one has the more one wants."

I've grown to count on your afternoon visit, and it upsets me to go without. My temperature has gone up every night from sheer aggravation. Isn't that true now, Pixie?"

"More blame to, you!" said Pixie. But her eyes met Stephen's with an anxiety which was not in keeping with her tone, and, in truth, after four days' absence the face on the pillow appeared to the onlooker, woefully drawn and white, Stephen registered a vow that Pat's temperature should not rise again through any neglect of his own.

"All right, Pat," he said. "I'll come as usual, and if it's inconvenient you can turn me out; and if Miss O'Shaughnessy will accept me for an escort I'll be proud to take her about. We'll begin with the Abbey to-morrow."

"That's all right; I thought you would. What's the good of a prospective uncle if he can't make himself useful!"

It was the first time Pat had made any reference to Stanor Vaughan, for, like the rest of the family, his pride had been stung by the non-appearance of Pixie's love, at the expiration of the prescribed two years. Pat knew that occasional letters passed between the young couple, and that the understanding between them appeared unbroken, but it was a poor sort of lover who would voluntarily add to the term of his exile. During the four days which Pixie had spent in the flat, almost every subject under the sun had been discussed but the one which presumably lay nearest the girl's heart, and that had been consistently shunned. It was only a desire to justify a claim on his friend's services which had driven Pat to refer to the subject now, and he sincerely wished he had remained silent as he noted the effect of his words. Stephen and Pixie stared steadily into space. Neither spoke, neither smiled; their fixed, blank eyes appeared to give the impression that they had not heard his words. In another moment the silence would have become embarrassing had not Pixie rung the bell and given an order for tea.

"Is this your first experience of living in a flat, Miss O'Shaughnessy? How do you like it, as far as you've got?" Stephen asked, with a valiant resolve to second Pixie's efforts, and she turned her face towards him, slightly flushed, but frank and candid as ever.

"I love it—it's so social! You know everyone's business as well as your own. The floors are *supposed* to be sound-proof, but really they're so many sounding-boards. The couple above had

a quarrel last night—at the high points we could hear every word. It was as good as a theatre, though, of course—” she lengthened her face with a pretence of gravity—“’twas very sad! But they’ve made it up to-day, because she’s singing. She has one song that she sings a dozen times every day ... something about parting from a lover. Pat says she’s been at it for months past—‘*Since we parted yester eve.*’ ... She feels it, poor creature! I suggested to Pat that we might board him, so that he might always be on the spot, and she wouldn’t have to part. He says it would be worth the money. ... The lady below sings ‘Come back to Erin’ by the hour. She’s *always* singing it! We thought of sending a polite note to say that we had given her request every consideration, but that owing to the unsettled condition of politics in that country we really did not see our way to move. ... And they have anthracite stoves.”

“Why shouldn’t they?” Stephen asked. He had greeted Pixie’s description with the delight of one who finds a painful situation suddenly irradiated by humour, but the anthracite stoves conveyed no meaning. “Why shouldn’t they, if they choose?”

Pixie scowled disapproval.

“So selfish! Noise like earthquakes every time they rake. I wake every morning thinking I’m dead. This morning I counted sixty separate rakes! Now, here’s a problem for you, Mr Glynn—How can you avenge yourself on an upstairs flatter? If it’s below: it’s quite easy—you just bang with the poker; but how can you do that on your own ceiling? ‘Tis no consolation to break the plaster!”

The tea was carried in as she spoke, and she rose to seat herself at the table, giving a friendly smile at the trim maid who had replaced the arrant “housekeeper.”

“Hot scones, Moffatt? You *do* spoil us!” she said cordially, and the girl left the room abeam with content.

“She adores me—all maids do,” announced Pixie, with her complacent air well to the fore. “It’s the way I treat them. My sister, now—Bridgie Victor—she’s a coward with her maids. She lies awake half the night rehearsing the best ways of hinting that she’d prefer pastry lighter than lead, after begging us all as a personal favour to eat it in case cook should be hurt. When I have a house—” She stopped short and busied herself with her duties, and neither of her listeners questioned her further on the subject.

Tea was a merry meal, and Pat consumed the dainty fare with undisguised enjoyment.

"That's the pull of an accident," he declared, as he helped himself to a third scone, "*ye can eat!* It's awful to think of poor beggars on a diet. ... Let's have muffins to-morrow, Pixie, *swimming* with butter. Glynn's coming!"

"Don't tempt me! I am coming to lunch, but you won't want me to stay on."

"Rubbish! We *do*. Stay for the whole day, and Pixie shall sing to us. It's the least she can do, if you take her to church."

Stephen looked at his hostess with a glance curiously compounded of dread and expectation. Music was the passion of his life, so true a passion that it was torture to him to hear the travesties which passed under its name. Bearing in mind the very small proportion of girls who could really sing, he wished that the proposal had never been made, since the result would probably mean a jarring episode in a delightful day.

"But you have no piano," he said uncertainly. "How can—"

"It's not a piano would stop me, if I wanted to sing. I don't need an accompaniment," Pixie declared, and Stephen shuddered in spirit. Unaccompanied songs were terrible ordeals to the listeners. Eyes as well as ears were tortured. One never knew where to look! He pondered as he drank his tea how the situation could be ameliorated, if not escaped, and reminded himself thankfully that if necessary he could hire a piano and send it in. Then, looking up, he met Pat's eyes fixed upon him with a quizzical smile. Pat showed at times an uncomfortable faculty for, reading his friends' thoughts, and Stephen realised that it was in force at this minute, and was thankful that at least it did not find vent in words. Pixie's happy complacency about her own powers was so far removed from ordinary conceit that he dreaded to wound it. He therefore hastily changed the conversation, and avoided the subject of music for the rest of his call.

The next morning, after arranging for Pat's comfort, Pixie retired to her eerie, and spent what appeared to the invalid an unconscionably long time over her toilette. After the cheerful manner of flats, by slightly raising the voice it was easy to carry on a conversation with a person in an adjoining room, and Pat therefore favoured his sister with a statement that he "expected to see something pretty fetching, after all this time!" "Ha! Ha!"

cried Pixie in return, and her voice gave no hint of modesty. Nevertheless, and for all his expectations, Pat gave a gasp of surprise when a few minutes later she sailed into the room.

She wore a coat and skirt of a soft, mouse-coloured velvet, very quiet and nondescript in hue, and the hat, with its curling brim, was covered with the same material. So far, very *douce* and quiet; but entirely round the hat, and curling gracefully over one side, was a magnificent ostrich plume, which was plainly the pride of its owner's heart. She tossed her head in answer to Pat's uplifted hands, pirouetted round and round, and struck a telling attitude.

"Yes! *Ain't* I smart? Me dear, regard the feather! I've longed for years to possess a scrumptious feather, and have talked by the hour, trying to convince Bridgie it was economical in the end. But she wouldn't. She said 'twas expensive at the start, and she couldn't see any further. Sometimes she *is* dense. She can't help it, poor creature, living with Dick! However, Esmeralda did, and she bought it in Paris to match my coat. It measures a yard, loved one! And *isn't* it kind of it to turn blue at the end? That little touch of blue just behind my ear *does* set me off! Honest Indian, Patrick! If you didn't know better, and came suddenly into the room, wouldn't you think I was a pretty girl?"

"I should!" answered Pat; but a moment later he added, with true brotherly candour, "But you're not."

"All the more credit to me!" retorted Pixie glibly. She lifted a chair which stood at the left of the fireplace, carried it to a similar position on the right, and seated herself upon it. "This side's the best.—I must sit here, and let Mr Glynn see my splendour in full blast. Won't he be pleased?"

"He'll never notice. Glynn's above hats," Pat maintained; but, nevertheless, he could not take his own eyes off the dainty grey figure, with the piquant face smiling beneath the brim of the wide hat, and that fascinating little tip of blue ending the long, grey plume. His admiration showed in his eyes, but he felt it his duty to be bracing in words.

"I never thought I should live to see *you* conceited about clothes!"

"Ye *do* get these shocks in life. It's a sad old world!" answered Pixie, and grimaced at him saucily, as she buttoned her glove.

And, after all, Stephen Glynn never did notice the feather. For a ten-pound note he could not have described the next day a single article of Pixie's attire. He was aware, however, it was pleasant to walk about with Pixie O'Shaughnessy, and that passers-by seemed to envy him his post, and he was relieved that she was disfigured by none of the extremes of an ugly fashion; and, after all, nine men out of ten rarely get beyond this point.

They sallied forth together, bidding Pat sleep all morning so as to be ready to talk all afternoon, and descended the gaunt stone stairs to the hall.

They walked quietly, but with enjoyment in each other's company. The usual crowd blocked the Abbey door, and Stephen and Pixie stood waiting under the statue of the "third great Canning" for some time, before at last they were escorted to seats in the nave. The sermon, unfortunately, they could not hear, but the exquisite service was to both a deep delight. Remembering the conversation of the night before, Stephen dreaded lest Pixie should be one of the mistaken ones who sing persistently through an elaborate choral service, thereby nullifying its effect for those around. He was thankful to find that his fears were unnecessary, but once or twice in an unusually beautiful refrain he imagined that his ear caught the sound of a deep, rich note—a soft echo of the strain itself, evoked by an irresistible impulse. He looked inquiringly at his companion, but her head was bent and the brim of her hat concealed her face. Her stillness, her reverence appealed to his heart, for it was easy to see that she was enjoying the music not as a mere concert, but, above all things, as an accompaniment to the words themselves. One time, when he glanced at her as she rose from her knees, he surprised a glimmer of tears in her eyes, and the sight brought a stab to his heart. Why should she cry? What was the reason of the air of repression and strain which from time to time flitted across her face? If it were Stanor's doing. ... Stephen frowned, and resolutely turned his attention to the service.

They came out of the Abbey to the majestic strains of the organ—out of the dim, blurred light shining shaft-like across the glowing mosaic of gold, and marble, and great jewelled windows, into the hard, everyday world. The pavements were crowded with pedestrians hurrying here and there; restaurants had opened their doors, tobacco merchants and newspaper vendors were hard at work, and country-bred Pixie stared around in amazed disapproval. They crossed the crowded

thoroughfares and, led by Stephen, found quiet byways in which it was possible to talk in comparative comfort alone.

"It was better even than I expected, and that's saying so much! It does one good to go to a service like that. It's so *big*!"

"The—the Abbey?" queried Stephen vaguely, and Pixie gave a quick denial.

"No. *No*! Not only the building—everything! There's an atmosphere of peace, and dignity, and calm. One gets away from littleness and quarrelling. It's so sad when people quarrel about religion, and one sect disputes with another..."

"It is indeed," replied Stephen, sighing. "The chances of conciliation would be so much greater if they fought with honey, not with gall. ... The world needs kindness—"

"Oh, it does! There is such sorrow, such pain!" Pixie's voice rang suddenly sharp, and a wave of emotion flitted over her face. She raised her eyes to his, and said suddenly, in a voice of melting pathos: "*Her face*! ... That girl's face! All these years I've never forgotten. ... It's lain *here*!" She touched her heart with an eloquent finger. "All these years—every night—I've prayed that they might meet..." She shook her head with a determined gesture, as though shaking off a haunting thought. "I couldn't forget, you see, because—it taught me ... things I had not understood—!"

"Yes," said Stephen dully. For his life he could not have said another word. He waited with dread to hear the next words.

"But it was *worth* learning!" Pixie said bravely. "I was glad to learn. Love is such a big, big thing. When it is given to you it's a big responsibility. You must not fail; nothing in the world must make you fail!"

Stephen said no word. The questions which had filled his brain for the last five days were answered now. There was no more room for doubt. Pixie O'Shaughnessy was ready and waiting to marry Stanor Vaughan at any time when it pleased him to come home and claim her promise.

Chapter Twenty One.

A Musical Evening.

Pixie had recovered her spirits by the time that the flat was reached, but the invalid was discovered in a distinctly "grumpy" mood. Like many enforced stay-at-homes, his unselfishness bore him gallantly over the point of speeding the parting guests, and expressing sincere good wishes for their enjoyment. But the long, long hours spent alone, the contrast between their lot and his own, the rebellious longing to be up and doing, all these foes preyed upon the mind, and by the time that the voyagers returned, a cool, martyr-like greeting replaced the kindness of the farewell, which was sad, and selfish, and unworthy, but let those suspend their judgment who have never been tried!

"Really? Oh! *Quite* well, thank you. Did you really?" ... The cold, clipped sentences fell like ice on the listeners' ears, and Pixie, going out of the room, turned a swift glance at Stephen Glynn, and wrinkled her nose in an expressive grimace. Somehow or other Stephen felt his spirits racing upward at sight of that grimace. There was a suggestion of intimacy about it, amounting even to confidence: it denoted a *camaraderie* of spirit which was as flattering as it was delightful.

Pat, as usual, recovered his good humour at the sight of food, and thoroughly enjoyed the simple but well-cooked meal, while Pixie and Stephen tactfully avoided the subject of their morning's excursion. Time enough later on to describe the beauties of that Abbey service!

"Moffatt is going out this afternoon. A friend is to call for her and bring her back this evening. It will be a change for the creature," announced Pixie when the meal was finished, and, meeting Pat's eye, she added quickly, "I'll make tea."

"What about supper?" queried Pat sternly. "If there's a meal in the week which I enjoy better than another it is Sunday night supper. What's going to happen about it to-night?"

"Deed I don't know. Don't fuss! It's beyond me to think two meals ahead. There's cold meat. ... I'll rummage up something when it comes to the time."

Pat turned gloomily to his friend.

"*You'd* better be off, Glynn. I asked you to stay for the day, but in view of unforeseen circumstances. ... Pixie evidently puts Moffatt's pleasure before our food."

"*I do!*" cried Pixie sturdily.

Stephen smiled, his bright, transforming smile, and said quickly—

"I'll stay! I'd like to, if you will just excuse me one moment while I telephone to my man. You have a telephone, I think, in the basement?"

Pixie shuddered.

"They have; in an ice-box, where every draught that was ever born whirls around your feet, and if you speak loud enough, every maid in the place will hear what you say. It's quite diverting to listen!"

Stephen went off laughing, and Pixie shook up Pat's pillows, bathed his hands, and kissed him several times on the tip of his nose, a proceeding which he considered offensive to his dignity, and then went off to change the crushable velvet skirt for a house dress of her favourite rose hue—a quaint little garment made in a picturesque style, which had no connection whatever with the prevailing fashion. When she returned to the sitting-room she seated herself on the floor beside the fire, and Pat, now entirely restored to equanimity and a little ashamed of his previous ill-humour, himself inquired about the morning's experiences. Like all the O'Shaughnessys he was intensely musical, and during his sojourn in London had taken every opportunity to hear all the good concerts within reach. He now wanted to hear about the music in the Abbey, and especially of the anthem, and at the mention of it Pixie drew a deep sigh of enjoyment.

"Oh, Pat, a boy sang 'Oh, for the wings'! If you could have heard it!—A clear, clear voice, so thrillingly sweet, soaring away up to that wonderful roof. And he sang with such feeling." ... She began softly humming the air, and Stephen knew then for a certainty whence had come those rich, soft notes which had come to his ears in the Abbey.

"Sing it, Pixie, sing it!" cried Pat impatiently. "You promised, and it's one of my favourites. Go on; I'll accompany!"

Stephen looked round inquiringly. No piano was in the room, no musical instrument of any kind, and Pat lay helpless upon his bed. How, then, could he accompany? The O'Shaughnessy ingenuity had, however, overcome greater difficulties than this, and it was not the first time by many that Pat had hummed an

effective and harmonious background to his sister's songs. As for Pixie, she opened her mouth and began to sing as simply and naturally as a bird. She had a lovely voice, mezzo-soprano in range, and though she now kept it sweetly subdued, the hearer realised that it had also considerable power. She sang as all true singers do—as if the action gave to herself the purest joy, her head tilted slightly on one side, as if to listen more intently to each clear, sweet note as it fell from her lips. ... *"Oh, for the wings, for the wings of a dove; far away, far away would I roam."* ... The words blotted out for the hearers the gathering twilight in the prosaic little room; far away, far away soared their thoughts to heights lofty and beautiful. *"In the wilderness build me a nest, and remain there for ever at rest."* ... How had so young a thing learnt to put so wonderful a meaning into that last word? Pat's rolling accompaniment swelled and sank; now and again for a phrase he softly joined in the words, and in the concluding phrase still another voice joined in in a soft tenor note agreeable to hear.

Pixie's eyes met Stephen's with a glow of triumph. "He *sings!*" she cried quickly. "Pat, he sings—pure tenor! Oh, what music we can have, what trios! Isn't it delightful? You can have real concerts now, old man, without leaving the flat!"

"It was a very beautiful solo, Miss O'Shaughnessy," said Stephen gravely. He was still too much under the influence of the strain to think of future events. As long as he lived he would remember to-day's experience, and see before him the picture of Pixie O'Shaughnessy in her rose frock, with the firelight shining on her face. Her unconsciousness had added largely to the charm of the moment, but now that the tension was relaxed there was a distinct air of complacency in her reply.

"'Tis a gift; we all have it. The concerts we had at Knock, and every one playing a separate instrument, with not a thing to help us but our own hands! I was the flute. D'ye remember, Pat, the way I whistled a flute till ye all stopped to listen to me?"

"I do not," said Pat. "I was the 'cello myself, fiddling with a ruler on me own knees, double pedalling with *two* knees! I had no thought for flutes. Ye made the most noise, I'll say that for ye!"

As usual in any discussion, brother and sister fell back to the brogue of their youth, which time and absence had softened to just an agreeable hint of an Irish accent. Stephen smiled with amusement, and expressed a wish to hear the exhibition on another day.

"But do sing us something else now," he said; "something worthy to come after 'The Wings.'"

And for the next hour, while the light waned till they could no longer see one another across the room, Pixie sang one beautiful strain after another, always in the same soft, restrained voice, which could neither disturb the neighbours above or below, nor be too strong for the size of the little room. It was not show singing—rather was it a series of "tryings over," prefaced by "Oh, do you know this?" or "Don't you love that bit?" so that each man felt at liberty to join in as the impulse took him, till at times all three were singing together.

The hours sped by with wonderful quickness, and when tea-time arrived Stephen insisted upon his right to help his hostess to clear away the meal, and when they returned to the sitting-room, lo! Pat had fallen asleep, and there was nothing to do for it but to return to the kitchen, now immaculately clean and neat under the rule of the admirable Moffatt.

"We might as well begin to think about supper, and forage around," Pixie suggested, but Stephen echoed her own dislike of thinking of meals too far ahead, and pled for delay.

"It's rather a strain to sit and look at cold meat for a solid hour at a stretch, don't you think?" he asked persuasively. "It would spoil my appetite. Can't we just—be quiet?"

"You can," was Pixie's candid answer; "I'm going to write! I've the greediest family for letters; do as I will, there's never a time when somebody isn't grumbling! Never mind me, if you want to smoke; I approve of men smoking, it keeps them quiet. Can I get you a book?"

Stephen shook his head. Pat's library did not appeal to his more literary taste, and he announced himself content without further employment.

"Oh, well then, *talk*! It won't disturb me," said Pixie easily; "I'll just listen or not, according as it's interesting. I'm accustomed to it with Bridgie. If you want to set her tongue going, just sit down and begin to write..."

Stephen, however, had no intention of taking advantage of the permission. He was abundantly content to sit in his comfortable chair, enjoy his novel surroundings (how very cheerful and attractive a *clean* kitchen could be!) smoke his cigarette, and watch Pixie scribbling at fever pace over innumerable pages of

notepaper. There were frequent snatches of conversation, but invariably it was Pixie herself who led the way.

"D'you illustrate your letters when you write them?" she asked at one time. "I always do! Realistic, you know, and saves time. At this present moment—" she drew back from the table, screwing up one eye, and holding aloft her pen in truly professional fashion—"I'm drawing *You!*"

"May I see?"

"You may. ... It's not *quite* right about the chair legs, they get so mixed up. Perspective never was my strong point," said Pixie, holding out a sheet and pointing to the masterpiece in question with the end of her pen. "There!"

Stephen looked and beheld a rough drawing of a preternaturally thin man, with preternatural large eyes, holding a cigarette in a hand joined to an arm which had evidently suffered severe dislocation. It was the type of drawing affected by schoolboys and girls, yet it had a distinct cleverness of its own. Despite the cart-wheel eyes and the skeleton frame there *was* a resemblance—there was more than a resemblance, it was actually *like*, and Stephen acclaimed the fact by a shout of laughter.

"I say! Could I have it? It's uncommonly good!"

Pixie shook her head.

"It's for Bridgie.—Ye notice the mouth? Did you know it twisted when you thought? Aren't they *nice*, narrow boots? I'll do one for you another day. ... Turn over the page! There's another of Pat, as he will look at the supper to-night."

The second drawing was even rougher than the first, but again the faculty for hitting off a likeness was displayed, for Pat, reclining on a bed sloping at a perilous angle towards the floor, gazed at a fragment of mutton-bone with drooping lids and peaking brows, which represented so precisely his expression when injured, that Stephen shouted once again.

"*Succès fou!*" commented Pixie jauntily, as she settled herself once more to her work. "Quite a gift, haven't I? Couldn't do pretties to save my life, but I *can* caricature! Now, please, *do* be quiet! I must get on..."

Half an hour later a loud rapping on the wall announced the awakening of the invalid, who was once more discovered in a fractious mood.

"Asleep! Nonsense! For two minutes, perhaps. How d'you suppose *any* fellow could sleep, with you two shrieking with laughter every two minutes! If you choose to keep your jokes to yourself, all right, it's nothing to me; but it's half-past seven. ... Where's supper?"

Even as he spoke another rap sounded on the front door—a brisk, imperative rap which brooked no delay. Pixie darted forward, imagining a surprise visit from the doctor, and found herself confronted by a man in black, standing sentinel over a hamper.

"Mr O'Shaughnessy's flat, madam? I have instructions from Mr Glynn—"

"All right, Saunders, bring it in, bring it in!" cried Stephen quickly. He met Pixie's eyes, flushed, and stammered—

"It's ... supper!" he said lamely. "I telephoned. It seemed a good plan, and I thought that, Pat.—Do you *mind*?"

"*Mind*!" repeated Pixie, laughing. "Faith I do! I mind very much; but it's the right way about; it won't be cold mutton, after all! I'll have to draw another picture."

The man carried the hamper into the sitting-room, unpacked it deftly, and laid the contents on the table. Soup, smoking hot from a thermos flask, chicken and salad, a shape of cream, and a fragrant pineapple. Pat's lips ceased to droop, his eyebrows to peak: his dark eyes lit with enjoyment.

"Good old Glynn!" he cried. "What a great idea! Now let's begin, and eat right through..."

As he took part in the happy meal which followed, Stephen Glynn reflected that generosity in giving went also with generosity in receiving. Pat and his sister would cheerfully give away their last penny to a friend in need. It never occurred to them to show less readiness to accept when it came to their own turn. Never was a surprise more happily planned; never was a surprise more heartily enjoyed.

Chapter Twenty Two.

He loved Her.

For the next week all went well. Pat's improvement, though slow, was so sure that a definite date was named on which he should be allowed to take his first few steps. The doctor grimaced to Pixie as he gave this promise, as if to insinuate that the experiment would not be pleasant, but Pat was prepared—in theory at least—for anything and everything, if thereby he might regain his freedom.

Stephen Glynn paid daily visits to the flat, and, in addition, escorted Pixie to various "sights" of the great city, in which, to tell the honest truth, she showed but little interest. Music was a passion with her, but of pictures she had no knowledge, and little appreciation. The antiques in the National Gallery left her cold and bored, though she was full of interest in what seemed to her companion the most uninteresting men and women who were employed in copying the canvases.

When with the frankness of criticism which he had learned from herself he rallied her on this inconsistency, Pixie's answer was characteristic—

"One is dead, and the other's alive. The most uninteresting live person means more to me than a world of pictures. That girl in the grey dress had tears in her eyes. ... Did you see? She looks so poor. Perhaps she wants to sell her copy, and no one will buy! There was a man talking to the fat woman next to her as we passed through before. He was writing something in his pocket-book. I believe he was buying the picture, and the poor grey girl felt so sad.—If Esmeralda were here, I'd make her buy her copy, too."

"It's a very *bad* copy!" Stephen pronounced. Then he looked down at the girl, and the transforming smile lit up his face. "All the same—would I do instead of 'Esmeralda'? I'll buy it at once, if you wish it!"

The grey eyes brightened, beamed, then clouded with uncertainty.

"Really? Ought you? Are you sure? It may cost—"

"That's my affair! Leave that to me. Would you like me to buy it?"

"I would!" came back at once in the deepest tone of the eloquent Irish voice, and at that Stephen strode forward, his limp hardly observable on the wide, smooth floor, and came to a halt by the grey girl's side.

Then followed what was to one spectator at least, a delightful scene. The surprise on the grey girl's face, the incredulity, the illimitable content, as the tall stranger made known his request, took out his pocket-book and handed her a card. Emotional Pixie had the softness of tears in her own eyes as Stephen rejoined her, and they walked away together down the long room.

"Well," he said smiling, "on your head be it! Now she'll go on painting atrocities, and wasting good time, when she might be sweeping a floor! It's against my principles to encourage the desecration of art."

"Why did you do it then?" Pixie demanded heartlessly, but next moment she smiled a beautiful smile. "*I know!* Thank you! Never mind about desecration. Art can look after itself, and *she* can't! And even if that particular picture isn't beautiful, you have given me another that is, the picture of her happy face! I think," she concluded slowly, "it's going to help me.—It will be a contrast to turn, to, when I see—*that other!*" She sighed, as she invariably did, when referring to those moments on the Liverpool landing-stage, but she shook off the depression with a characteristic gesture, a defiant little shake not only of the head, but of the whole body, and cried briskly: "Now let's imagine what she does when she goes home with that cheque!"

At home in the little flat, music made part of every day's programme. Pixie, seated on the hearthrug, would sing Irish ballads in a voice of crooning sweetness, she and Pat would join in duets, occasionally Stephen was persuaded to join in a trio, and presently, as the performers became "worked up" to their task, they would recall one by one performances of bygone days, and perform them afresh for the delectation of their visitor. Pixie whistled a bird-like accompaniment to Pat's deep drone; Pat, retiring bashfully beneath a sheet, whistled in his turn not only an air, but actually at the same time an accompaniment thereto, a soprano and contralto combination of sounds, so marvellous to hear that he was compelled to repeat the performance unmasked, before Stephen would believe in its authenticity. Fired by the success of their efforts, combs were then produced, and, swathed in paper, turned into wind instruments of wondrous amenability. Surprising effect of a duet upon combs! Again, when towards the end of the week the

repertoire gave out, and "What shall we sing next?" to fail of an answer, Pixie revived another old "Knock" accomplishment, which was neither more nor less than impromptu recitatives and choruses. A bass recitative by Pat, on the theme—"And she went—to find some mat-ches. And there—were—none... Tum-Tum!" led the way to the liveliest of choruses, in which, goaded by outstretched fingers and flashing eyes, Stephen was forced to take his part. "There were none!—there were none!" piped Pixie in the treble. "And she went—and she went!" rumbled Pat in the bass. "Matches! Matches!" fell from Stephen's lips, on a repeated high tenor note. Through ever-increasing intricacies and elaborations ran the chorus, until at last at a signal from the soprano it approached its close, the three singers proclaimed in unison that "there—were—none!" and promptly fell back in their seats in paroxysms of laughter. In the course of the last twenty years, had he laughed as much as he had done within the last wonderful week? Stephen asked himself the question as he walked home the night after the singing of the "Matches" chorus, and there was little hesitation about the answer.

A week, ten days of unshadowed happiness and companionship, and then a cloud arose. Pat was not *well*; he grew worse; he grew seriously ill. The knee itself had done all that was expected of it, but the first attempt at walking, to which the poor fellow had looked forward as to a festival, proved in reality a painful and depressing experience. Back in his bed, limp with pain and exhaustion, poor Pat realised his own weakness with a poignancy of disappointment. He had expected to be able to walk at once, though not perhaps for any length of time, and these few stumbling steps had been a bitter revelation. All these weeks of confinement and suffering, and now a long and dragging convalescence! Pat's heart swelled with bitterness and rebellion. Despite the presence of Pixie and the constant visits of his friend, he was sick, sick to death of the one small room, and the monotonous indoor life, and as a young man successfully started in a young business, he longed with ardour to get back to his work.

The world looked very black to Pat O'Shaughnessy for the rest of that day, and atmospheric conditions did not help to cheer him. It was raining, a slow, relentless rain, and in the air for days past had been a rawness, a chill which crept to the very bone. Pixie drew the curtains over every chink, and hung a shawl over the end of Pat's bed to still further screen him from draughts, but Pat was not in the mood to be coddled, and had that shawl whisked to the ground before one could say Jack

Robinson. He was curt and silent in his manner, and—rare and significant sign!—partook of a fragmentary tea. Nothing was right; everything was wrong; his patience was exhausted, and though he remained studiously polite to his friend, with his sister he unrestrainedly “let himself go.”

“Don’t wriggle, Pixie! ... Don’t shout!—Don’t tell us that story all over again. ... Don’t lean against my bed. ... Don’t sit between me and the fire!” so on it went all through the afternoon, which as a rule was so cheery and peaceful, and if Pixie preserved a placid composure, Stephen Glynn was far from following her example. He relapsed into a frigid silence, which added but another element to the general discomfort.

The final stroke came when Pixie lifted the despised shawl and attempted to wrap it round Pat’s shoulders, and was rudely repulsed, and told to mind her own business and not be a fool. Then, with his air of *grand seigneur*, Stephen Glynn rose from his chair and made his adieux. Cold as crystal was his manner as he extended his hand to the invalid on his bed, and Pixie followed him on to the little landing, apologetic and miserable.

“You are going so soon? If you could stay and talk hard it might divert him from himself. He *needs* diverting!”

“I cannot,” Stephen declared. “It’s beyond me. After all you have done—after all your care, to speak to you so rudely!—”

He had passed through the front door of the flat, and Pixie stood within the threshold, her hand clasping the handle of the door, her face, tired and strained, raised to his own.

“He didn’t!” she cried quickly. “Oh, he didn’t. It wasn’t Pat who spoke—it was the pain, the pain, and the tiredness and the disappointment. They force out the words. Haven’t you found that yourself? But his heart doesn’t mean them. He’s all raw and hurting, and I worried him. ... I shouldn’t have done it! You must be angry with me, not with Pat.”

Stephen gave her a long, strange look.

“I think I—” he began, and stopped short suddenly.

“What?” queried Pixie, and there was a long pause.

“I—don’t know!” he answered dreamily then, and without a word of farewell turned away and descended the steps.

But he did know. In the moment in which he had stood facing her while she pled her brother's cause, the secret of his own heart was revealed. Never under any circumstances could he be angry with Pixie O'Shaughnessy. He loved her; she was for him the one woman in the world; with all the stored-up love of his empty life he loved her, and longed for her for his own. That was the reason of his happiness during the past days, of the extraordinary new zest and interest in life which had filled his mind; of his content in Pixie's contentment, his anxiety for her anxiety, his furious resentment when she was abused. And he loved her. He loved her when she lapsed into her Irish brogue, and said "Me dear"; he loved her when she assumed Frenchified airs, struck attitudes, and cried "*Ma foi!*" he loved her when she was sad, when she was glad, when she was youthful and mischievous, when she was serious and old, when she walked beside him in the street in the hat with the curling feather, when she sat on the hearthrug in her rose-hued dress crooning songs in her soft, sweet voice. Always, and always, he loved her; she had crept into his heart like a ray of sunshine lighting up unused rooms; she had melted his coldness, as the south wind melts the frost. He loved Pixie, and Pixie was going to marry Stanor Vaughan...

Stephen Glynn stepped shuddering into the clammy street, and away up on the fifth floor landing Pixie still stood motionless, holding the handle of that open door, repeating to herself dreamily that he would come back, he must come back! He had never said good-bye!

Chapter Twenty Three.

Complications.

On the following afternoon Stephen Glynn failed to pay his daily visit to the flat. After the revelation of the night before he had neither the strength nor the courage to encounter Pixie anew. Little use to shut the stable door after the steed had flown, but he must at least have time to think, to face the future, and decide upon his own course. And then at seven o'clock came the ring of the telephone, and Pixie's voice speaking piteously in his ear—

"Is it you? You yourself? Oh, why didn't you come? I was waiting for you. I wanted you. Pat's ill! He's ill, and he won't let me send for the doctor. Oh, do come round!"

"I'm coming!" Stephen said, and hung up the receiver. Pixie wanted him, that settled the matter. In half an hour's time his car stopped before the entrance to the flat, and the chauffeur was bidden to wait for further orders, while his master mounted the long flights of steps.

Pixie was seated beside the fire, and the glance of her eyes spoke of a warning which he was quick to understand. Pat was not to suspect that his friend had been summoned on his behalf. He turned towards the bed, and said lightly—

"Sorry to be late, old man. How goes it? Tried the walking again?"

"This morning. Yes. But—" Pat shrugged wearily—"not since. Got a head—"

Stephen looked at him critically. Bright eyes, flushed cheeks, shortened breath, all the danger signals to the fore.

"Bit feverish, old man, that's the trouble! Exerting yourself too much perhaps. Good thing I didn't come to tire you further. Get that doctor fellow to give you something to cool you down, and give you a good night's rest, and the little cherub will wake up bright as a button."

"Shan't!" Pat cried. "No more doctors! Sick of the sight of doctors! What have doctors done for *me*? Chained here all these weeks, and worse at the end! I can look after myself."

"Taken your temperature by any chance?"

"What's the good? Don't *you* start worrying, Glynn! I've had enough of it from Pixie. I'm not going to be worried with temperatures."

"Don't behave like a child, O'Shaughnessy. No one wants to worry you with doctors if it can be helped. I don't wonder you are tired of them, but you can't run risks. Take your temperature like a sensible fellow, and if it's under a hundred, I'll leave you in peace. Otherwise I go downstairs this minute and telephone for Braithey. Where's the thermometer, Miss O'Shaughnessy? Now then, in with it!"

Pat scowled, but submitted. The glass tube was held between set lips, and a silence ensued which Stephen made no effort to break. Pixie waited expectantly for him to join her, but he kept his position by the bed, without so much as turning his head in

her direction. And upon entering he had avoided her glance, had dropped her hand after the most perfunctory, clasp, and last night he had gone away without even saying good-night. ... She had offended him: certainly she must have offended him, Pixie told herself, though *how* she was unable to think. She stared into the fire, feeling tired, and sad, and discouraged.

"Three minutes. Yes, that's enough. Let me see! I'm getting quite clever with these puzzling things. Ye-es!" With a deft jerk of his wrist Stephen shook the thermometer, and returned it to its case. "Slightly up! No escape for it, Pat. Braithey must come!"

"I won't see him. I won't see him if he comes! Look here, Glynn, it's my affair! Leave me alone, there's a good fellow! I can look after myself..."

Stephen walked steadily to the door.

"I'll take good care you don't. That's enough, Patrick, don't waste your strength! I'm going downstairs to telephone, and if Braithey's at home my car shall bring him round. It's waiting outside."

He disappeared, and the storm burst over Pixie's head, but she bore it meekly, with a kind of stunned acceptance. *Everything* seemed going wrong! The sunny harmony of the last ten days had suddenly changed to gloom. Pixie's thoughts made a lightning review of those different days. How perfectly, incredibly happy they had been! Until this moment she had not fully realised their perfection.

"Ah, now, Pat, stop! Don't worry, boy! It's not my head! ... Wait till to-morrow and you'll be better than ever, and think of the trouble it'll give you to apologise. ... It's because we *care!*"

"Wish to goodness you didn't then," cried the impenitent one. However he might wish to apologise to-morrow, he was in no mood to begin to-night, but the pain in his head was so acute that by sheer exhaustion he was forced into silence.

Stephen did not return as had been expected after sending his telephone message. He preferred, it appeared, to go on the car, and personally bring back the doctor, and half an hour later the two men entered the room together. Then ensued the usual tapping and sounding, the enforced reiteration of "Ah-ah!" the feeling of the pulse, the ignominious presentation of the tongue. Pat went through the performance with the air of a martyr at

the stake, sank back against the pillow when it was over, and hunched himself beneath the clothes.

"That's right! That's right! Lie still and rest. We'll soon have you all right again. Have a little nap if you can, while I give Miss O'Shaughnessy my instructions in the er—er—"

Doctor Braithley reminded himself in time that there *was* no second sitting-room, and concluded grandiloquently—"in the hall!"

They went out into the tiny passage, and Stephen and Pixie waited for the verdict.

"Well! The right lung is touched. He has taken a chill. Now we must see what we can do to prevent it from going farther."

He cast an inquiring glance at Pixie.

"D'you know anything about poulticing?"

"Yes, everything! I've helped my sister with her children, and I brought the things..."

"That's well! Poultice him then, a fresh one every two hours. Here! You understand, in this position," he tapped himself in illustration. "I'll send in medicines, and we'll see how he is to-morrow morning. If he is no better you'll need help. We'll see about that when I call."

A few more words and he was gone, racing down the long stairway, while Stephen lingered behind with an air of uncertainty.

"I—suppose I can be of no use! Pat ought to be quiet, and I'm no hand at poulticing. You are sure you can manage alone?"

Pixie nodded, struggling with a lump in her throat. *Why* wouldn't he stay? Why did he so obviously not *want* to stay?

"I can. It will be all right. Moffatt will help me."

"And to-morrow ... to-morrow you must get a nurse!"

"No!" cried Pixie with sudden energy, "I will not. I'll have no stranger. I'll have Bridgie." Her heart swelled at the sound of the beloved name; she felt a helpless longing to cast herself on

that faithful breast. "Bridgie must come. There's no room for a nurse in this tiny place. Bridgie could share my room."

"We'll telegraph for her," Glynn said. "I will come round after breakfast, and if Pat is not quite himself, I'll telegraph at once. She could be with you by tea-time."

He was kind and considerate. He was thoughtful for her comfort, ready to help by deed as well as word. Pixie could not explain to herself wherein lay the want, but the reality of it gnawed at her heart, and darkened still further the hours of that long, anxious night.

Despite poultices, despite medicine, there was no doubt even to Pixie's inexperienced eyes that Pat was worse the next morning. His breathing was heavier, he was hotter, more restless. Without waiting for Stephen she sent the little maid to telephone to the doctor, and through the same medium dispatched a summoning wire to Bridgie in her northern home.

The succeeding hours were filled with a nightmare-like struggle against odds which palpably increased with every hour. Stephen came in and out, turned himself into a messenger to obtain everything that was needed, sent round a hamper of cooked dainties which would provide the small household for days to come, drove to the station to meet Bridgie and bring her to the flat, and oh! the joy, the relief, the blessed consciousness of help, which came to nurse and patient alike at the sight of that sweet, fair face! In one minute Bridgie had shed her hat and coat, in the second moment she was scorching herself by the fire, to remove all trace of chill before she approached the bedside, in the third she was sitting beside it—calm, sweet, capable, with the air of having been there since the beginning of time, and intending to stay until the end.

For the next few days Pat had a sharp struggle for his life. Pneumonia clutched him in its grip, and the sound of his painful breathing was heard all over the little flat. There was a dreadful night when hope was well-nigh extinguished, when Stephen Glynn and the two sisters seemed to wrestle with the very angel of death, and Pat himself to face the end. "Shall I—die?" he gasped, and Bridgie's answering smile seemed to hold an angelic sweetness.

"I hope not, dear lad. There's so much work for you to do down here, but if you do—it's going home! Mother's there, and the Major! They'll welcome you!"

But Pat was young, and the love of life was strong within him. He had loved his parents, but still more at that moment he loved the thought of his work. He fought for his life, and the fight was hard.

Into most lives there comes at times such a night as this; a night of dark, illimitable hours, a night when the world and all its concerns withdraws itself to unmeasurable distance, and the division between life and the eternal grows thin and faint. *Would Pat live to see the morning?* That was the question which to his sisters overwhelmed every other thought. Afterwards, looking back, Pixie could recall certain incidents registered by the sub-conscious self. Being gently forced into a chair; being fed with cups of something hot and nourishing, placed suddenly in her hands by Stephen Glynn, always by Stephen, who seemed by his actions to regard her as a secondary invalid, to be tended with tenderest care. Once, becoming suddenly conscious of his presence, as she stood in the kitchen preparing some necessary for the sick man, a growing fear burst into words, and she asked him pitifully—*how* pitifully she herself could never know—

"Was it *my fault*? Was there *anything* I could have done?"

"No, dear," he said simply. "It is not your fault."

Pixie was certain that he had said "dear." The rhythm of it remained in her ears, that, and the deep gentleness of his tone. He had been sorry for her, *so* sorry! And he was so much older, and he was Stanor's uncle. Why should he not say "dear?"

Short and sharp was the attack, but by God's mercy the crisis passed, and brought relief. Weak as a child, but peaceful and quiet, Pat slept, and took his first steps back towards life.

At last the danger was over, and Pat's natural vigour of constitution made the convalescence unusually quick, but even when he was comparatively well again, Bridgie refused in an altogether amazing and unprecedented manner to return to her beloved home. She suggested not once, but many times in succession, that Pixie should return in her place to take the head of the household, but here Pat grew obstinate in his turn.

No! Pixie had had all the dull work of nursing; he was not going to allow her to return until she had had some fun. And when he began to go out for walks, pray, who was going to accompany him, if Pixie went away? "You'd be off after her, the moment you saw me on my feet. Don't deny it, for I know better!" Pat declared, and Bridgie blushed, and did not deny it. Already she

was pining for Dick and the children; already counting the hours to her return, *but...*

Movement was evidently in the air; perhaps it was caused by the bright, spring days which had replaced the former gloom. Pat on his bed discussed a possible holiday before returning to work. "It might hurry things," he said. "What do you say, Pixie, seaside or country? Must go somewhere where there's something to *do*! Winter garden, concerts, bands, people to look at. I want to be amused. We'll have a week somewhere, and blow expense. You might come too, Glynn, and bring the car."

Glynn was sitting in his usual place beside the fire; Bridgie was by the bed; Pixie prone on the hearthrug. During the last few days the invalid had been sufficiently strong to enjoy the society of his fellows, had even called upon Pixie to sing, and had apparently greatly enjoyed the hearing, though Bridgie seemed for once unappreciative, and had discouraged further efforts. Now his mind had turned on to holidays, and he had made this direct appeal to Stephen, which seemed to find scant favour from two out of the three hearers.

Bridgie frowned, and stared at the carpet; Stephen's pale face showed a discomfited flush.

"You shall have the car with pleasure. It shall take you wherever you decide to go, and be at your service for as long as you please, but for myself, I must get home. I—I am not usually in town for so long at a time. There are several things waiting attention which should not be delayed. I must get back..."

There was a dead silence, while each one of the three hearers realised the futility of the excuse. Stephen's estate was in the hands of a capable agent: an extra week's absence could make little difference; moreover, previous statements had made it plain that he had originally intended to stay for some considerable time in town. Plain, therefore, as print, and impossible to misunderstand was the fact that he did not *want* to accompany his friends on their holiday; that in addition he did not for the moment desire more of their company in town.

Bridgie raised her head: she was smiling, a bright, unaffected, *relieved-looking* smile.

"There's no end to the work on a big estate. The Major—my father—used to say that every man was his own best bailiff, though he made a fine muddle of it himself, poor darling! But

my brother Jack agrees with him. He's educated Miles to look after the Irish property, and so does Geoffrey Hilliard. ... It's true he is away half his time—"

At the best of times Bridgie was scarcely a special pleader, and to-day she seemed no sooner to make a statement than she contradicted it straight away. She mumbled vaguely, and relapsed into silence.

"Of course we won't take your car. You will need it for your business excursions!" Pat said icily. "We are very much indebted to you for letting us have the use of it here. It's been of great service, hasn't it, Pixie?"

"It has! I don't know what we'd have done without it. We *are* grateful," agreed Pixie warmly. Her voice out of all the four was the only one which rang true; her eyes smiled across the room with unembarrassed friendliness. Nevertheless Bridgie, looking on, felt a cramp of pain. How much older Pixie had grown in appearance! The lines of strain and repression over which she had sighed more than once before now had surely deepened during the last weeks! Anxiety, no doubt, the strain of nursing—Bridgie comforted herself as best she might, but no explanation could take away the pang which the mother heart feels at the sight of pain on a young face!

"Come, Pixie," she said, rising, "we'll make tea! I promised Pat potato cakes as soon as the doctor allowed them, and that's to-day. We'll have a feast!—"

"Leave them to themselves," she said confidingly to Pixie when the kitchen was reached. "They'll shake down better without us. Pat's fractious; he always was from a child when he was crossed, but the potato cakes will soothe him. I'm sorry for Mr Glynn. Really, you know, dear, Pat's *exacting*!"

"'Deed he is. It's no wonder he is tired of it." Bridgie needed no explanation as to the significance of that second he. "He's been fussing about us for weeks, and now he'll go home and rest. It's a good thing! Will I mash the potatoes for you, Bridgie?"

"Thank you, darling," said Bridgie humbly, but her face remained troubled. Once more, and with all her heart, she wished that Pixie were safe at home.

The rumble of men's voices could be heard from the kitchen—an amicable rumble it appeared to be, though with mysterious breaks from time to time. Bridgie bustled in, tea-tray in hand, in

the middle of one of these breaks, and surprised a look of sadness on each face. She decided that Stephen was to depart forthwith, but such was not the case, since over tea he alluded to an old promise to take Pixie to the Temple, and included Bridgie in an invitation for the following Sunday.

"And then I must be off—on Monday—or—or perhaps on Tuesday," he said vaguely. "One day next week."

"I leave on Monday too," said Bridgie, and ate her potato cake with recovered zest.

Chapter Twenty Four.

He loves You.

That evening Pat showed early signs of fatigue, and requested Bridgie to settle him for the night, bidding the while so marked a farewell to Pixie that she had no alternative but to retire forthwith to her own room. Truth to tell she was not sorry, for sleep had been an uncertain quantity of late, and the prospect of a long undisturbed night was agreeable. She dallied over her undressing, and when Bridgie joined her half an hour later, sat perched upon the bed, dressing-gowned, her hands clasped round her knees, watching with admiring eyes the picture of her sweet-faced sister seated before the dressing-table engaged in brushing out her long fair hair.

"You've a fine head of hair, me dear! It's wearing well. ... D'you remember the day you and Esmeralda had the trick played on you about going to bed, and sat up half the night brushing and combing to tire out the other?"

"I do so," answered Bridgie, but it was but a faint smile which she gave to the memory of that youthful joke. She parted her hair with a sweep of the brush, and gazing at her sister between the long gold strands said suddenly, and earnestly, "Pixie!"

"Me dear?"

"There's something I want to say. ... To-morrow Mr Glynn will be here. Pat's asked him to come back after church. He is going away on Monday, so it will be the last time. Be *careful*, darling! Think what you're about. You don't want to be unkind—"

Pixie stared—a stunned, incredulous stare.

“Unkind! To *him*! Are you raving? What am I to be careful about?”

“Oh—oh—*everything*!” Bridgie’s breath came in a gasp of helplessness. It had been difficult to speak, but a sense of duty had driven her on, and now it was too late to stop. “Don’t—don’t talk to him so much. Don’t look at him.” (Did Pixie realise how instinctively her eyes sought Stephen’s for sympathy and appreciation?) “Don’t sit by the fire and sing.”

A flush spread over Pixie’s cheek; her eyes widened.

“*Why*? Doesn’t he like it? Isn’t it *nice*?”

“Oh-oh, *Pixie*!” cried Bridgie helplessly. A vision rose before her of a little figure in a rose-coloured gown, of the firelight playing on the upturned face. She heard again, the deep crooning notes which filled the room with sweetness. To herself, a sister, the picture was full of charm—what must it be to a lonely man, in love for the first time in thirty-five years? She rose from her chair and came across to the bed: face to face, within the stretch of an arm, the sisters waited in silence, while the clock on the mantelpiece ticked out a long minute. “Pixie,” whispered Bridgie breathlessly, “*don’t you know*?”

“What?”

“Don’t you know, Pixie, that he loves you?”

“Who loves me?”

“Stephen Glynn. Oh, Pixie, didn’t you see?”

The colour faded from Pixie’s face; she threw out her hand as if to ward off a threatened danger. There was a note almost of anger in her reply—

“It’s not true; it’s not! It couldn’t be true. ... He care for me! For Me! You’re mad, Bridgie! You’re dreaming! There’s nothing...”

“Oh, Pixie, there *is*! I saw it the first evening. I’d have spoken before, but Pat was so ill. Then I tried—you know how. I tried!—to send you away. I knew that every day was making it harder for him, more difficult to forget. I was so *sorry* for him! Pixie, he is thirty-five, and has suffered so much. It’s hard on a man when he gets to that age, and—”

"Don't!" cried Pixie sharply. She thrust out her hand once more, and cowered as if from a blow. "Bridgie, I can't bear it! Don't torture me, Bridgie. ... It *isn't* true! You are making it up. Ah, Bridgie, it's because you love me yourself that you think every one must do the same! He's—Stanor's uncle ... Pat's friend—he was just kind like other friends. ... He never said a word ... looked a look." Suddenly, unexpectedly the blood flared in her face as memory took her back to the hour when she stood at the door of the flat and watched Stephen's abrupt descent down the flagged stairway. "Oh, Bridgie, are ye sure? Are ye *sure*? How are ye sure? It's so easy to be deceived! Bridgie, you've no *right* to say it if you are not sure. I don't believe you! Nothing could make me believe unless he said—"

"Pixie, he has said!" The words fell from Bridgie's lips as though in opposition to her judgment she were compelled to speak them. "Pat was hurt that he was going; he reproached him to-night after we left; they had a discussion about it, and he said Stephen Glynn said that he daren't stay, he daren't see more of you. ... Pat does not think he meant to say it, it just—said itself! And afterwards he set his lips, and put on his haughty air, and turned the conversation, and Pat dared not say another word. But he had said enough. ... His face! ... his voice! ... Pat did not believe he could feel so much. He cares desperately, Pixie."

Pixie sat motionless—so silent, so motionless, that not a breath seemed to stir her being. Bridgie waited, her face full of motherly tenderness, but the silence was so long, so intense, that by degrees the tenderness changed into anxiety. It was unlike emotional Pixie to face any crisis of life in silence; the necessity to express herself had ever been her leading characteristic, so that lack of expression was of all things the most startling, in her sister's estimation. She stretched out her hand, and laid it on the bowed shoulder with a firm, strengthening touch.

"Pixie! Look up! Speak to me! What are you thinking, dear?"

Pixie raised her face, a set face, which to the watching eyes seemed apiece with the former silence. There seemed *no* expression on it; it was a lifeless mask which had been swept of expression. As the blank eyes looked into her own and the lips mechanically moved, Bridgie had the sensation of facing a stranger in the place of the beloved little sister.

"I am honoured!" said Pixie flatly. "I am honoured!"

She rose slowly from the bed, moving stiffly as though the mere physical effort were a strain, and passing by Bridgie's inviting arms walked over to the dressing-table and began to loosen her own hair.

"You have finished, Bridgie? I'm not in your way?" she asked quietly, and Bridgie faltered a weak "No!" and felt that the world was coming to an end.

Pixie silent; Pixie dignified; Pixie quietly but unmistakably holding her sister and guardian at arm's length, this was an experience petrifying in its unexpectedness! She had not spoken on the impulse of a moment; for days past she had been nerving herself to open Pixie's eyes. At the bottom of her heart had lain a dawning hope that such an opening might not be in vain, for Pixie had never really loved Stanor Vaughan. At the time of their engagement she had not even understood what love meant; during the years of their separation there had been nothing but an occasional letter to preserve his image in her mind, and when the allotted two years were over, Stanor himself had voluntarily extended his exile. Bridgie set her lips as she recalled a fact so hurtful to her sister's dignity. She heard again Pat's voice, echoing the sentiments of her own heart. "Tell her, Bridgie! She ought to know. He's worth a thousand of that other fellow. Don't let her throw away the substance for the shadow."

So she had spoken, and a new Pixie—a Pixie she had never even imagined in dreams—had listened, and made her reply. "I am honoured!" she had said, and straightway, sweetly, courteously, irrevocably, had closed the subject.

Bridgie bent her head and plaited her hair in the two long ropes which made her nightly coiffure. She was thankful of the employment, thankful of an excuse to hide her face; she listened to the ticking of the clock upon the mantelpiece and asked herself what she should do next. The incredible had come to pass, and she, Bridgie, sister, guardian, married woman, mother of a family, was nervous in Pixie's presence! Not for any bribe that could have been offered would she have ventured to hint at that hope which she and Pat had shared in common.

Suddenly through the little flat rang the sound of the postman's knock. The last of the many deliveries of the day had arrived, and Bridgie peeping out of the door spied a couple of white envelopes prone on the mat. She crept out to get them, thankful of the diversion, and was overjoyed to behold on one her husband's writing.

"One for me, Pixie, and one for you—an enclosure forwarded from home. I'm so glad to get mine. It's nice for the postmen in London to have Sundays free, but we country people *do* miss letters," she said glibly, as she handed Pixie her share of the spoil, and seated herself in the one comfortable chair which the room afforded, to enjoy to the full the welcome message from home.

Perhaps Dick had divined the double anxiety which was burdening his wife, perhaps he realised how long she would feel a Sunday without news, perhaps out of his own loneliness had arisen a need for words—in any case, that special letter was the longest and, to Bridgie's heart, the dearest which she had received since her departure from home. He told her of the children, and of their latest sayings; he told her of himself and his work; he comforted her, where she needed comfort, cheered her, where she needed cheer, called her by the sweet love names which she most loved to hear, and held before her eyes the prospect of a swift return. And Bridgie reading that letter thanked God for the thousandth time, because on her—undeserving—had been bestowed the greatest gift which a woman can receive—the gift of a faithful love!

Ten minutes had passed before she had read and re-read her precious letter, but when she turned her head it was to find Pixie standing in the same position as that in which she had seen her last, gazing down upon a sheet of paper on which a few short lines were written in a masculine writing. At Bridgie's movement she raised her head, and spoke in a curiously low, level voice—

"It is from Stanor. He has sailed for home. Honor Ward and a party of friends were crossing, and he decided at the last moment to come with them. We shall see him on Thursday next."

Chapter Twenty Five.

Stanor comes back.

It was Thursday morning. With the doctor's permission Pat's bed had been carried back to the minute apartment which was grandiloquently termed a "dressing-room." A sofa took its place in the dining-room, and with the aid of a stick he could walk from one refuge to another, and enjoy what—after the

confinement of the past months—appeared quite an exciting variety of scene.

Bridgie Victor was still a joint occupant of the “best” bedroom, for since Pat refused to part with Pixie it was plainly the elder sister’s duty to stay on over the important meeting with Stanor Vaughan. The modern girl scoffs at the idea of chaperonage, but the O’Shaughnessys were not modern. Bridgie felt the impulse to protect, and Pixie’s piteous “*Stay with me, Bridgie!*” marked the one moment of weakness which she had shown. So Bridgie remained in London, comforted by the knowledge that her husband was well and her children in good hands, and seldom in her life had five days passed so slowly. Sunday itself had seemed a week long, the atmosphere strained and unreal, each member of the little party talking to pass the time, uttering platitudes, and discussing every imaginable subject under the sun but just the one which filled every mind. No need to bid Pixie to be discreet, to warn her not to sing, nor glance too frequently in a certain direction—a talking automaton could not have shown less sign of feeling.

As for Stephen Glynn, the news of his nephew’s sudden return obviously came to him as a shock, but as a man of the world he was an adept in hiding his feelings, and though he curtailed his visit, so long as he was in the flat he exerted himself to preserve an ordinary demeanour. His adieux also were of the most commonplace description.

“It’s hardly worth while to say good-bye. We shall meet, we shall certainly meet before long. I will write to welcome Stanor, and you—” he held Pixie’s hand and looked down at her with an inquiring glance—“you will let me hear your—news?”

“I will,” answered Pixie simply.

Bridgie would have given a fortune to be able to see what was in “the child’s” head at that moment, to know what she was really thinking. The sisters walked together to the door, Pat, on his stick, bringing up the rear, and stood watching Stephen descend. Once and again he looked up, smiled, and waved his hand, and as he did so his eyes had the same piteous glance which Pixie had noticed on their first meeting. The expression of those upturned eyes hurt all three onlookers in different degrees, and sent them back to their little room with downcast looks.

“Now he’ll bury himself in the country again and mope! It’s been the making of him being here in town. Goodness knows

what will happen to him now!" said Pat, dropping on to the couch with an impatient sigh, and Bridgie murmured softly—

"The dear, man! The dear man! So hard for, him to be alone. But you needn't be anxious, Pat. He's so *good*. He'll be looked after! ... Don't you think, now, his eyes are the least thing in the world like Dick's?"

"Not the least least!" snapped Pixie, and that was her one contribution to the conversation.

And now it was Thursday—Thursday afternoon, within an hour, of the time fixed by telegram for Stanor's arrival. Pat had elected to stay in bed, in consequence of what he called headache and his sisters translated as "sulks." He didn't want to see the fellow. ... What was the fellow to him? Didn't know how the fellow had the face to turn up at all, after dawdling away an extra six months. Hoped to goodness the fellow would make short work of it and be off, as he wanted to get up for dinner.

In her heart Bridgie agreed with each sentiment in turn, but she felt it her duty to be stern and bracing.

"Deed, and I hope so, too! Else I shall have to sit here, and you're not the best company. I'm your guest, me dear—if you haven't the heart to be civil ye might at least have the good manners! My little Jack would never dr-eam—"

"Little prig he must be, then," mumbled Pat; but the reproof went home, and he grumbled no more.

Just before the clock struck the hour Bridgie paid a flying visit to the little sitting-room to see that the tea-table was set, the kettle on the hob, the dish of hot scones on the brass stand in the fender, and everything ready to hand, so that no one need enter unless specially summoned. She found Pixie standing gazing into the fire, and started with surprise and disappointment.

"*Pixie*, your dress! That dull old thing? Why not your pink? Me dear, you've time. ... There's still time. ... Run off and change it!"

But Pixie shook her head.

"Bridgie, *don't fuss!*" she said, and there was a note in her voice which checked the words on Bridgie's lips. She literally dared

not say any more, but her heart was heavy with disappointment.

She had been so anxious that Pixie should look her best for this important interview, had been so complacently satisfied that the rose-coloured gown was as becoming as it could be, and now the aggravating, mysterious little thing had deliberately left it hanging in the wardrobe, and put on instead an old brown dress which had been a failure at the beginning, and was now well advanced in middle age. One result of Pixie's sojourn in Paris had been an acquired faculty for making the best of herself: she put on her clothes with care, she wore them "with an air," she dressed her hair with neat precision, and then with a finger and thumb gave a tweak here, a pat there, which imparted to the final effect something piquant and attractive. To-day it appeared as if that transforming touch had been forgotten, and Bridgie, looking on, felt that pang of distress which all motherly hearts experience when their nurslings show otherwise than at their best.

"Are you not going to sit with Pat?" inquired Pixie at the end of a pregnant silence, and at that very obvious hint Bridgie retired perforce, repeating gallantly to herself, "Looks don't matter! Looks don't matter! They don't matter a bit!" and believing just as much of what she said as would any other young woman of her age.

Another ten minutes and the sound of the electric bell rang sharply round the flat. The door opened and shut, and Moffatt, entering the sitting-room in advance, announced loudly—

"Mr Vaughan!"

A tall, fair man entered with a rapid step. Pixie looked at him, and felt a consciousness of unutterable strangeness. This was not the man from whom she had parted on the deck of that ocean-bound steamer! This man was older, broader; the once lazy, laughter-loving eyes were keen and shrewd. His shoulders also were padded into the exaggerated square, characteristic of American tailors.

"Well—Pixie!"

Even the voice was strange. It had absorbed the American accent, the American clip and drawl. Pixie had the consciousness of struggling with stiffened features which refused to smile.

"Well—Stanor!"

He took her hand and held it in his, the while he stared down at her upturned face. His brows contracted, as though what he saw was more painful than pleasant. "I guess you've been having a bad time," he said. "I was sorry to hear your brother's been sick."

"He is better now," Pixie said, and gently withdrew her hand.

Two and a half years' waiting, and this was the meeting! She drew herself up, with the little air of dignity which she knew so well how to assume, and waved him to a seat.

"Won't you sit down? I will give you some tea. It is all ready, and the kettle is boiling. When did you arrive in town?"

"Two hours ago. I went straight to my hotel to write some letters, and then came along here. ... This is your brother's apartment? Nice little place! It's good news that he is better! Hard luck on him to be bowled over like that!"

The accent, the intonation carried Pixie's thoughts irresistibly towards another speaker, whose memory was associated with her own first meeting with Stanor. On the spur of the moment she mentioned her name.

"Where is Honor Ward? Is she in London, too?"

Stanor started; over his features passed a quiver as of anxiety or dread. He glanced across the fireplace, and the new keenness in his eyes became still more marked.

"Er—no! She stopped half way. Later on ... perhaps—"

"She is quite well?"

Again a moment's hesitation.

"Fairly well, only ... Very tired."

"I don't wonder she is tired; she does so much. Always rushing about after something new. They seem very restless people in America."

"They're alive, anyway; they don't rust! They're bound to get the most that's possible out of life, and they get it! It shakes a

fellow up to get out of the rut here and have a taste of their methods."

"You like it—better than *home*?" Pixie paused, teapot in hand, to cast upon him a glance full of patriotic reproach, whereat he laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"Isn't home the place where one settles down, and which feels to be most congenial?"

"You find America more congenial than England?"

He shrugged again, and the old gleam of laughter showed in his eyes.

"Now look here, isn't it bad luck to begin asking embarrassing questions straight away off? I hoped I was going to avoid this point! If you must have the truth—I *do*! America suits me!"—his smile was full of complacency—"I suit America. That's not by any means a sure thing. Many Englishmen throw up the sponge and return home. They can't adapt themselves, don't *want* to adapt themselves. In my case I had had no business experience in England, so I began with an open mind without prejudice, and—it *went*: I like the life, I like the people. I like the climate. The climate is answerable for a lot of the extra energy which you over here call 'restlessness.' You want to do just about twice as much beneath those skies!" He cast an impatient glance towards the window. "It's all so *grey*! ... I've had a headache straight on the last two days."

"Tea's ready now; it will do you good. There are hot scones in that dish," Pixie said quietly. The greyness of the street seemed to have entered the room—to have entered her heart. It was *all* grey. ... "We knew, of course, that you *must* like it, when you stayed so long."

Now there was something which was *not grey*. Stanor's face flushed a painful red; he looked at his cup, at the floor, in the fire, at anything but in Pixie's face. His voice was hard with repressed embarrassment.

"Er—just so; you would, of course! There was work on hand. I waited to see it through. When a man has spent two years in the same place so many claims arise, in social life as well as in work. It is difficult for him to break away at a moment's notice. He is hardly his own master."

"I'm sure it is. And when there was work you were quite right to stay on. It would have been wrong to have left it unfinished."

Stanor, looked up sharply, met clear, honest eyes, which looked back into his without a trace of sarcasm. She *meant* it! Voice and look alike were transparently genuine. At that moment she was essentially the Pixie of old, the Pixie to whom it came naturally to believe the best. The flush on Stanor's cheeks deepened as he realised the nature of the "work" which had made his excuse. His voice deepened with the first real note of intimacy.

"That's like you, Pixie! You always understood. ... And now tell me about yourself. What's happened to you since I heard last? Six months ago, was it? No! barely four. Didn't you write for Christmas? Been jogging along as usual at home, playing games with the babies?"

"Yes; just jogging," said Pixie. Then of a sudden her eyes flashed. "'Over here' we don't find the 'best of life' in a *rush*! It comes to some of us quite satisfactorily in a jog! 'I guess,' as you say, that my life as been as much 'worth while' as if I'd spent it in a round of pink luncheons and green teas, as your American friends seem to do."

The unexpected happened, and, instead of protesting, Stanor sighed, and looked of a sudden grave and depressed.

"You're right there, Pixie; that's so, if you are built the right way! But some of us—" He checked himself, and began afresh in a voice of enforced enthusiasm. "Well!—and then you came up here to nurse your brother, and found the Runkle already in possession. I *was* surprised to read about that in your letter at Liverpool. Odd, isn't it, how things come about? And how *is* the old fellow?"

Again Pixie's eyes sent out a flash. How was it that every fresh thing that Stanor said seemed to hurt her in a new place?

"Considering his great years and infirmities, the old fellow seems surprisingly well."

"Halloo, what's this?" Stanor stared in surprise. "Said the wrong thing, have I? What have I said? He seems old, you know, if he isn't actually so in years. I used to look upon him as a patriarch. Not so much his looks as his character. Such a sombre old beggar!"

"He wasn't sombre with *us*!"

Memory flashed back pictures of Stephen's face as he sat in the arm-chair by the fire, listening to those impromptu concerts which had enlivened Pat's convalescence. Pixie saw him as he leaned forward in his chair, waving his hand baton-like, heard his voice, joining lustily in the "Matches" chorus. In that very room—in the very chair in which Stanor now sat. ... What centuries seemed to have lolled by, between that day, and this!

"Wasn't he? That's good! I'm glad to hear that," Stanor said perfunctorily. "It takes time, of course, to get out of invalid ways. I shall have to be running down to see him one of these days."

"Oh, of course; he'll expect you. And then—then you'll begin your work over here. In London, I suppose?"

"I ... er ... the firm is in town. There—er—there will be a lot to arrange." Suddenly Stanor leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, his eyes searching her face. "Pixie, this is an odd sort of conversation for our first meeting! ... We've got wrong somehow. ... Can't we get right? Why waste time on generalities. ... Are you *glad* to see me back, Pixie?"

"I am!" Pixie's eyes gazed back without a flicker. "When I got your letter I was—thankful! I think it was—time—you came back."

"Have you missed me, Pixie, while, I've been away?"

Now she hesitated, but her eyes remained steady and candid.

"It had been such a little time, you know; and you had never stayed with us at home. I could hardly *miss* you out of my life, but I ... *thought* of you!"

"Did you, Pixie? Did you, little Pixie? ... I wonder *what* you thought!"

Pixie did not answer that question. The answer would have been too long, too complicated. She smiled, a wistful little smile, and turned away her head.

Then Stanor rose. She heard him rise, heard the chink of the tea-things on the tray as he pressed upon it in rising, heard his footsteps passing round the table towards her chair, heard in a sickening silence his summoning voice—

"Pixie!"

"Stanor!"

They looked at each other;—white, strained, tense.

"Pixie, will you marry me?"

"Yes, Stanor, I will. If you want me..."

Chapter Twenty Six.

"What have I done?"

There was a moment's silence, a moment which seemed like an hour. Then Stanor spoke—

"Thank you, Pixie!"

He put his arms round her, made as if to kiss her cheek, but the small hands held him off with unexpected strength.

"Not yet! Not yet! You haven't answered my question!"

"What question?"

"*If you want me?*" The grey eyes were very near his own. They seemed to search into his very soul. "*Do you want me, Stanor?*"

"Pixie, what a question! You ... you *know* the answer."

"I think I do." She nodded her head with a grave certainty. "I'm sure I do. ... You *don't* want me, Stanor!"

He started at that, and his hands relaxed their hold. The dull red flush mounted once more to his forehead, his lips twitched, and twitched again. The man was suffering, and the marks of his pain were plain to read.

"Why ... should you say that? Pixie, what is it? I explained about that extra six months. ... You said you understood. It was part of the agreement that we were not to write except on occasions. Were my letters wrong? Didn't they please you? I was never a good hand at letter-writing. Was that it? What was it? What have I done, Pixie, to make you doubt me?"

"I don't think," said Pixie dreamily, "you have done anything." It seemed for a moment as if she had nothing more to say, then suddenly she asked another question: "Stanor! That day in Liverpool, on the landing-stage, did you notice a girl standing near me—a girl with a fur cap?"

"No, Pixie. I noticed only one girl—yourself!"

"She was parting from a man—her lover or husband—who was leaning over the rail and looking down at her. Stanor ... they ... *cared!* They loved each other. ... All these years I have had their faces in my heart. I looked at them, and I looked at you, and I understood the difference!"

"I was miserable enough, Pixie. All men do not show their feelings in the same way."

"I knew you were sorry. I was sorry, too. ... I'm not blaming you. I've no right to blame you. I have waited for you, and you've come back. You have asked me to marry you. Stanor!" She clasped his arms with her hands, her eyes intently gazing into his. "I'll tell you the truth about myself.—I was a child when you went away. I didn't know how to love. Now I do! If you love me, Stanor, with your whole heart and soul, more than any one in the world, more than *anything* in the world, then marry me, dear, and I'll make you happy! If you don't ... if there is any doubt in your mind, if there is some one else who has grown nearer to you while you've been away—I shouldn't be angry, Stanor, only," her voice shook, a quiver passed over the upturned face, "please tell me *now!* Be honest! It's for all our lives, remember. ... We've no right to spoil our lives. God gave them to us; we're responsible to Him. *It will* spoil them, Stanor, if there's not real, real love between us. Now tell me ... look in my eyes and tell me, Stanor ... *do* you want me?"

But he could not face her. He wrenched himself free of her grasp, turned towards the mantelpiece, and with a groan buried his face in his hands.

"Pixie, you ... you shame me ... you cover me with shame! I ought to have known that I could not deceive you. ... You are not the sort to be deceived. ... It's worse than you think. ... When the temptation came, I could have kept out of the way ... she wanted me to keep away, but I wouldn't do it. I followed her wherever she went—I— you'd better know the whole truth, and then you'll understand the kind of fellow I am. It's not my fault that I wasn't married months ago, that you didn't read it in the papers without a word of preparation! That's what I wanted

... what I proposed. It was she who refused. It is her doing that I *am* here to-day. She would have nothing to say to me till I had asked you first.—I wanted to stay on in America, settle down there, and keep out of the way—”

He had spoken with his face hidden; now, as he finished speaking, he remained in the same position, and not a sound came to his ears but the ticking of the clock in the corner. He might have been alone in the room; a miserable conviction seized him that he *was* alone, that between himself and the girl by his side there had arisen an impenetrable wall.

As for Pixie she had promised not to be angry, but it appeared to her at that moment that she had never before known what anger meant. It burned within her—a flame of indignation and wounded faith, a throwing back on herself of all the arduous mental battles of the last few days. Never, even to herself, had Pixie acknowledged that she had learned to love Stephen Glynn. That it hurt her to know of his love for her; hurt intolerably to see him depart, were truths which could not be ignored, but while Stanor lived and was faithful it was impossible even to contemplate love for another man. Pixie had enough knowledge of her own nature to realise that she could be happy in giving Stanor a happiness which he could only gain through her. It was as natural to her to be happy as for a flower to lift its face in the sun, but for both the sun was needed. A more introspective soul would have realised that there were degrees in happiness, and that she would be missing the best; Pixie with characteristic simplicity accepted what seemed to her the right step, and shut her mind against vain regrets.

But—Stanor did not want her. He was *not* faithful. He had had so little consideration for her feelings that he would have let her read of his marriage in a public print. He had appeared now only at the command of another.

“I think,” said Pixie deeply, “you are a cowardly man. I am sorry for the girl you are going to marry. She seems to have a conscience, but it would have been kinder of her if she had made you tell me the truth without first trying to spoil my life. I suppose you *would* have married me if I had said ‘yes,’ or was it only a form which you never intended to keep?”

“You are hard on me, Pixie, but I deserve it. I have no excuses to make. My only comfort is that I have not ruined your happiness. Like you, I have learnt my lesson, and I can see one thing clearly: You don’t love me, Pixie!”

"No, I don't love you, but I have kept myself for you. I have closed my heart to every other thought. I *would* have loved you if you had needed me. Nothing, nothing in the world could have made me deceive you!"

"I knew it! We both knew it! Honor said—"

"*Honor!*" Pixie's cry rang sharp. "Is it Honor? Honor Ward?" Somehow the knowledge seemed an additional hurt; she sat down on a chair and clasped her cold hands. The brain flashed back memories of occasions dating back to the very beginning of Stanor's life in America, when his name and Honor's had been coupled together. "Honor Ward and I." "Stanor Vaughan and I." ... Memories of an earlier occasion still when Honor had said with *empressement*. "You can trust me, Pixie!" Even then, had she foreseen what might happen—even then, with her knowledge of her own character and Stanor's, seen danger ahead? Well, Honor *had* been loyal! From Stanor's manner, even more than his words, it was obvious that had there been no impediment in the way as regards her own wishes, yet she had refused him, had sent him home to keep his troth. After that first sharp moment Pixie had no coldness in her heart towards Honor Ward.

Stanor was talking, moving restlessly to and fro, telling the story of the past years in jerky, disconnected sentences, blaming himself, exonerating Honor. The sound of his words penetrated to Pixie's brain, but not the sense. It seemed to her useless to listen; there was nothing more to be said.

Suddenly she rose from her seat with an air of decision.

"I think you had better go. Bridgie, my sister—Mrs Victor—is here. I would rather you didn't see her. She will be angry; they will all be angry. They are fond of me, you see; and they will think I have been humiliated. I am *not* humiliated! No one can humiliate me but myself; but just at first they won't be reasonable. ... Will you please go?"

"Pixie, don't think about me ... think of yourself! I will leave it to you to tell your own story.—I have asked you to marry me, and you have refused. ... Tell them that ... tell them that *you* refused, that it was *your* doing, not mine—"

The glance of the grey eyes gave him a hot tingling of shame.

"You don't understand," said Pixie softly. "I am *proud* of being the faithful one! You don't understand..." She laid her hand on the door, but Stanor stopped her with another question—

"And—Honor? What shall I say to Honor? She thinks so much of you. She'll do nothing without your consent. Some day when she comes to London ... will you ... see her, Pixie?"

Pixie shook her head.

"It would hurt us both, and do no good. Give her my love. As for you—I can't give her what is not mine. ... You belong to *her*, so there's nothing more to be said. ... I hope you will make her happy."

"I will—I will! At this moment I seem to you an unmitigated scoundrel, but things will be different. ... We shall settle in America. I will help her with her work. We'll work together. I'd give my life for her ... I *will* give it! I'll make amends..." He stood still, waiting as if there were still more to be said. "My uncle will be angry, but it is his doing. If it had not been for him, we should have been married years ago. He shouldn't blame me for what he has brought about. His is the blame. If I see him—*when* I see him—can I say anything from you?"

"Tell him," said Pixie clearly, "that I am grateful to him. *His is the praise!*"

Chapter Twenty Seven.

Honor's Letter.

Bridgie was angry. It was rarely indeed that her placid nature was roused to wrath, but she did the thing thoroughly when she was about it. In a flow of eloquence, worthy of Esmeralda herself, she revived incidents in Pixie's life, dating from babyhood onwards, to prove to the chairs and tables, and any odd pieces of furniture which might happen to be listening, the blameless and beautiful character of the maid who had even been spurned ("spurned" was the word used) by a recreant unworthy the name of scoundrel. She dived into the past, and pictured the feelings of those past and gone; she projected herself into the future, and bequeathed a Corsican legacy of revenge. She lavished blame on Joan, Geoffrey, herself, Jack and Sylvia, Pat and Miles, even the beloved Dick himself, and

refused to hear a word in Honor's defence. The only person who came unscathed through the ordeal was Stephen Glynn, whom, it would appear, had absorbed in himself the wisdom which every one else had so shamefully lacked.

When Bridgie ended Pat began. The news had had an unexpected effect, in rousing the invalid and restoring him to a feeling of health more powerfully than a hundred tonics could have done. For the first time for weeks past he forgot himself and his woes, and behold a new man, with a strength and vitality astounding to witness. Pat announced his intention of sallying forth and thrashing the beggar forthwith; he dealt bitterly with the squeamishness of the English law with regard to duels, declared in the same breath that he could never have believed in the possibility of such behaviour, and that he had prophesied it from the first. He adjured Pixie repeatedly, and with unction, to "Buck up!" and when the poor girl protested valiantly that she *was* bucking, immediately adjured her to be honest, for pity's sake, and "let herself go!"

An ordinary person would have found such a form of comfort far from soothing, but Pixie was an O'Shaughnessy herself, and it *did* soothe her. She understood that Bridgie and Pat were relieving themselves by saying all that they felt, *more* than they felt, and that presently the storm would pass and the sun shine again. By to-morrow all bitterness would have passed. She sat in her chair and submitted meekly to be lectured and cajoled, wrapped in a shawl, provided with a footstool, ordered to bed, supplied with smelling-salts, and even—tentatively—with sal-volatile, but she made no attempt to still the storm. She knew that it would be useless!

Finally Pat stumped off to his bedroom, to draft a rough copy of a letter intended to be the most scathing communication which had ever passed through the post; and Bridgie, very white and shaken, seated herself on a chair by her sister's side.

"Pixie, dear—I'm afraid we've not been helpful. ... I lost my head, but it was such a shock.—I flew into a passion without hearing what you had to say for yourself. ... Darling, tell me—tell me honestly—*how do you feel?*"

"I feel—" Pixie raised both hands, and moved them up and down above her shoulders, as though balancing a heavy load—"as though a great ton weight had been rolled off my shoulders. ... Bridgie! You are angry; I was angry too, but now I've had time to think. ... There have been two and a half years since he went away—that's about nine hundred days. ... Bridgie! If you

only knew it—there's not been one day out of all that nine hundred when you hadn't more cause to pity me than you have to-day!—"

Suddenly, passionately, she burst into tears.

Two days later Bridgie Victor returned home. The need for chaperonage was over, and it was abundantly evident that Pixie was in no need of consolation. The first shock of disillusionment over, it was pre-eminently relief that she felt—relief from a bond which had weighed more and more heavily as time passed by. If Stanor had come home, looking his old self, caring for her, depending on her as he had done during the days of their brief engagement, she would have been ready and willing to give him her life, but it had been a strange man who had entered the sitting-room of the little flat, a man with a strange face, and a strange voice, and a heart that belonged to another girl. Pixie was *free*; the bonds which had bound her were loosed, and with each hour that passed her liberty became more sweet. She shared in her sister's relief that the understanding with Stanor had been known to no one outside the family, for no human girl enjoys being pitied for such an experience, and Pixie had her own full share of conceit. It was comforting to know that there would be no talk, no fuss; that she could go her way, free from the consciousness of watching eyes.

On the morning of Bridgie's departure two letters arrived by the first post, and were read in silence by their respective owners. Bridgie's was in a man's handwriting, and the perusal of its lines brought a flush to her cheeks and the glimmer of tears to her eyes. She put it in her pocket when she had finished reading, and remained densely oblivious of her sister's hints.

"What does he say?"

"Who?"

"Mr Glynn, of course. Don't pretend! I know his writing."

"He's very ... very—I don't know exactly *what* he is, Pixie. He is as we all were at first—upset!"

"What does he say?"

"Oh, er—er—the usual things. Sorry. Ashamed. It's so difficult for him, because, of course, in a certain sense it *is* his doing. ... Naturally, he feels—"

"What does he say?"

"Pixie, *don't* go on repeating that! It's stupid. I've *told* you! And there's a message for you. He thanks you for *your* message, (I didn't know you had sent one!) and says it was 'like you.' What did you say?"

But Pixie did not enlighten her.

"I think he ought to have written to me!" she said decisively. "After all, Bridgie, it is my business, not yours. I thought he *would* write."

Bridgie had the grace to blush.

"But just at first, dear, it is difficult.—He feels it so much. It's easier to a third person. Later on, in a few months' time, when things have settled down, he wants to come north to see us. It will be easier then..."

"Oh!" Pixie seemed of a sudden as eager to avoid the subject as she had been to continue it. She handed her own letter across the table with a short "From Honor! You may read it," and thereby protected herself against the scrutiny of Bridgie's eyes.

The sheet was covered with a large, straggling handwriting, and Pixie, reading it, had seemed to hear Honor's very voice speaking to her.

"My dear Patricia,—I guess you may not want to hear from me, but I'm bound to write, and maybe I can say a few things that will help us both. You're feeling pretty badly at the moment. But I want you just to realise that I've been feeling that way for a good year back, and to try to see both sides.

"It began, Patricia, through our both feeling lone and lorn and trying to comfort each other. You'll recollect you *asked* me to be good to him! Things went on all right for a spell, but before we knew where we were that friendship had got to be too important to us both. There wasn't a thought of disloyalty in it, Patricia, on his part or mine, and the very first time I had an inkling of what was

happening I went off west for a tour of four months. I presume it was too late by that time, for when I went home (I was bound to go home!) matters didn't seem to have mended. After a while we had it out—it was bound to come some time—and I told Stanor straight he'd either got to make a clean breast of things to you or never see me again. Up till then, I guess, we'd behaved as well as any two youngsters could have been expected to do under the circumstances, but after that things went to pieces. He *wouldn't* tell, and he *couldn't* keep away! I'm not defending Stanor. He's shown up pretty badly over this business. He's been weak, and obstinate, and dishonourable. I don't delude myself a mite, but, you see, Pixie, I love him! It's the real thing with both of us this time, and that makes a mighty difference. I can see his faults and feel sorry about them, but it don't make me love him any the less; and if all my money were to pan out to-morrow he'd be sorry, but he'd love me just the same. So there it was, Pixie—and a wearing time I've had of it, fighting against his wishes—and my own! In the end I decided to join some friends and come over to Europe, and leave him to think things over by himself. Maybe I guessed he'd follow and be forced to meet you. It's difficult to understand one's own motives at these times. Anyway, before I knew where I was he'd taken a berth in the same boat, and—here we are!

"Stanor says you have grown-up, and look different. You are both different after these years apart, and, anyway, it was a mistake from the beginning, Patricia, and wouldn't have worked out. Now, we suit each other, and the life we are going to lead will bring out the best in us both! He seems to you pretty contemptible at this moment, but there's so many sides to one human creature, and that is only one side. He's got lots of others that are good and true—

"Yesterday I had an ordeal. I was introduced to the 'Runkle.' Why didn't I know he was like that? He was quite courteous—he couldn't be anything else. But his eyes, (what eyes!) made arches at me, as if to say, 'He prefers *her*!' and I felt frozen stiff. Now I

shan't rest satisfied till that man's my friend, but it will take time—

"Pixie, we're going to be married quite soon—as soon as ever we can fix up the necessary formalities, spend a honeymoon in Switzerland, and get back to our work. I don't ask to see you—just at the moment it would do no good, but couldn't you just manage to send me a line to melt this stone in my heart? I'd be so happy if it wasn't there. But it won't melt till I hear from you, that you understand, and you forgive!

"Lovingly,—Honor."

Bridgie read and sighed, folded the sheet carefully, and sighed again.

"It's so *difficult*,"—she began.

"What is difficult?"

"To be as angry with people as you would like!" replied Bridgie unexpectedly. "You start by thinking that all the right is on your own side, and all the wrong on theirs, and that you're a martyr and they are brutes, and that your case is proven and there's not a word that could be said in their defence; and then of a sudden—" she lifted the letter in her hand—"you get *this*! And they *have* a side, and they are not brutes; and instead of being angry you have to be—you are forced into being—sorry instead! It does feel hard! I didn't *want* to be sorry for Honor Ward..."

"I'm not sorry for her," said Pixie softly, "I'm glad. She's going to be happy. ... Bridgie, dear, what can I send her, for a wedding present?"

Chapter Twenty Eight.

Pixie finds her Happiness.

As soon as Pat had sufficiently recovered, he and Pixie travelled to Ireland to spend a few weeks in the old homestead, now blooming in fresh beauty under the management of Jack O'Shaughnessy and Sylvia his wife. The great hall which had been of old so bare and desolate was now embellished with

Turkey carpets and tapestried walls: so far as the eye could reach there was not one shabby, nor broken, nor patched-up article; in sight; the damp and fusty odour which had filled the great drawing-room, and which for years had been associated with State apartments in Pixie's youthful mind, was a thing of the past. Even in the chilliest weather the room remained warm, for electric radiators, cunningly hidden from sight, dispelled the damp, and were kept turned on night and day, "whether they were needed, or whether they were not," to the delight and admiration of the Irish staff. For pure extravagance, for pure pagan delight in extravagance, the Irishman *and* woman are hard to beat. The very warmth and generosity of their nature makes it abhorrent to them to stint in any direction, which is one reason, out of many, for the prevailing poverty of the land.

Jack and Sylvia made delightful hosts, and it was a very happy and a very merry quartette which passed those spring days together in Knock Castle. They were complete in themselves, and any suggestion of "a party" was instantly vetoed by the visitors, who announced their desire to remain "just as we are."

Sylvia and Pixie rode or drove about the country, pulling up every half mile or so to chat with cottagers, who were all eager to see Miss Pixie, to invoke blessings on her head, and—begging her honour's pardon!—to sigh a sigh for the memory of the times that were no more.

On frequent occasions this same curious, and to English-bred Sylvia, inexplicable regret for the days of old was manifested by the dwellers on the country-side. "*What did they want?*" she asked herself impatiently. "What could they wish for that had not already been done?" Repaired cottages, improved sanitation, higher wages, perquisites without number—since the new reign all these things had been bestowed upon these ungratefults, and still they dared to regret the past!

Sylvia had not yet grasped the fact that her birth and upbringing made a chasm between herself and her tenants which no kindness could span. They would burn her peat, waste her food, accept, and more or less waste again, all that she chose to bestow, but given a choice between the present days of plenty and the lean, bare years of the reign of the jovial "Major" and his brood, they would enthusiastically have acclaimed the latter's return.

Occasionally something of the same spirit would manifest itself in the O'Shaughnessys themselves, as when Jack's voice would take on an apologetic tone in telling his brother of some

improvement in the estate, or Pixie gazing at the old Persian carpet in the dining-room would sigh regretfully, "There *used* to be a hole!" On such occasions Sylvia was sometimes forced to depart on a visit to the nursery and relieve her feelings by a stamp *en route*. When she returned Jack's twinkling eyes would search her face, and he would take an early opportunity of passing her chair and touching her with a caressing hand, and once more all would be peace and joy.

Jack and his wife heard from Pat's lips all details as to Stanor Vaughan and his approaching marriage, but to Pixie herself the subject was never mentioned.

"Anyway, she's not fretting!" said Jack. "Never saw her brighter and happier. Bless her big, little heart! I'm thankful the fellow has taken himself out of her way. She'd never have given him up of her own accord. We've all been so happy in our marriages that we can't stand any second-bests for Pixie! When are *you* going to settle down, old chap?"

"Oh, about next June year," replied Pat calmly. "Always said I would about twenty-eight. Nice time of year, too, for a honeymoon!"

"But ... but..." Jack stammered in surprise. "Have you met the girl?"

"My good man! Dozens! There's no difficulty there. Faith, I love them all!" sighed handsome Pat.

Well, it was a happy holiday, but there was no sadness when it came to an end, for Pat was ready and eager to get back to work, and Pixie to the northern town which meant Bridgie and home. Brother and sister parted with mutual protestations of gratitude and appreciation, and with several quite substantial castles in the air as regards future meetings, and within a few days both had settled down to the routine of ordinary life.

"Pixie is just the same. All this business has not altered her at all," Captain Victor said to his wife, and Bridgie smiled at him, the same sort of loving, indulgent smile which she bestowed on her small son when he guilelessly betrayed his ignorance.

She knew that Pixie *had* altered, felt the alteration every day of her life, in a subtle, indefinite manner which had escaped the masculine observation. There was a certain expression which in quiet moments had been wont to settle on the young face, an expression of repression and strain, which now appeared to

have departed for good, a certain reserve in touching upon any subject connected with love and marriage, which was now replaced by eager interest and sympathy. Gradually, also, as the months rolled on there came moments when a very radiance of happiness shone out of the grey eyes, and trilled in the musical voice. The time of Stephen Glynn's visit was drawing near; another week, and he would actually arrive. What would be the result of that visit? Bridgie could not tell. In a matter so important she dared not take any definite rôle, but in her prayers that week she implored the Divine Father to send to the dearly loved little sister that which He in His wisdom knew to be *best*.

And then, as usual, Pixie did the unexpected thing. The sisters were sitting together at tea the day before Stephen was expected, when suddenly she looked across the room, and said as quietly and naturally as if she had been asking the time—

"Do ye think now, Bridgie, that he will ask me to marry him?"

Bridgie started. Up to her cheeks flew the red. It was she who was embarrassed, she who stammered and crumbled the hem of the tablecloth.

"My dear, I don't know! How should I? How can I possibly know?"

"I didn't ask you if you knew. I asked if you *thought*."

"I—don't know what to think. ... I know what he *wants*! But he is so sensitive, so humble about himself. He thinks he is too old, and ... and his lameness—he exaggerates things all round. From what he said to me in that letter—"

"That letter you wouldn't show me?"

"Yes. I couldn't, Pixie! It was in confidence, and besides, he said nothing *definite*. It was only inferred. It's just because he idealises you so much that he thinks he is not worthy. No one can tell what a man will do when it comes to the time, but what he *means* to do is evidently—to say nothing!"

"Oh!" said Pixie. She nibbled a fragment of cake for a thoughtful moment, and then said calmly—

"So now I know. Thank you, Bridgie. *Please* don't say any more!"

"No, darling, no, I won't; only please just one thing—it has puzzled me so much, and I have longed to know. ... There's never been any reserve between us—you have confided in me so openly all your life till just these last years. *Why* didn't you tell me you were unhappy about Stanor?"

"How could I, me dear, when I might be his wife? It wouldn't have been loyal. And it wasn't unhappiness exactly, only—a weight. I was *trying* to keep on loving him, and hating myself for finding it difficult, but I knew if he came back loving me, and wanting me to help him, the weight would go. But you see, he didn't!"

"Pixie, dear, one should not need to *try*. That sort of love ought to feel no strain."

"If Stanor had needed me, I should have married him," Pixie said obstinately, "but he didn't, and, me dear, excuse me! It's not the most agreeable subject. ... Let's talk of something else."

The next day Stephen Glynn arrived, and put up at an hotel. An agricultural show which was being held in the town made an excuse for his visit; it also made a vantage ground for daily excursions, and gave opportunities of securing *tête-à-tête* to those anxious to do so. Pixie was conscious that several such opportunities had in Stephen's case been of intent ignored and allowed to pass by, but never once did she doubt the motive which prompted such neglect. From the moment of their meeting the consciousness of his love had enveloped her. He might set a seal on his lips, but he could not control his eyes, and the wistfulness of that glance made Pixie brave.

Almost the first opportunity for undisturbed conversation came on the afternoon of the third day, when Stephen paid an unexpected call at the house to propose an expedition for the evening, and found Pixie alone.

She was sitting writing in the pretty, flower-decked room, where the French window opened wide to the garden beyond. It was only a mite of a garden, not big enough for even a tennis-court, but so much love and ingenuity had been lavished on its arrangement that it had an astonishing air of space. The flower-covered trellis at the end had an air of being there because it chose, and not in the least because it marked an arbitrary division of land. The one big tree made an oasis of shade, and had a low circular seat round its trunk, and the flowers bloomed in grateful recognition of favours bestowed.

There are points in which the small garden has a pull over the large. Its owner can, for instance, remember just how many blooms a special plant afforded last summer, and feel a glow of pride in the extra two of the present season; she can water them herself, tie up their drooping heads, snip off the dead flowers, know them, and love them in an intimate, personal way which is impossible in the large, professionally-run gardens. Bridgie's garden this summer afternoon made a very charming background for the figure of Pixie in her white dress, with the jaunty blue band round her waist, and a little knot to match fastening her muslin Peter Pan collar. She looked very young and fresh and dainty, and the wistful expression deepened on Stephen's face as he looked at her.

For the first few minutes conversation was difficult, for the consciousness of being alone seemed rather to close the way to personal subjects than to open it. Stephen was grave and distraught, Pixie embarrassed and nervous, but the real deep sympathy between them made it impossible that such an atmosphere should continue. Before ten minutes had passed Pixie's laugh had sounded with the characteristic gurgle which was the very embodiment of merriment, and Stephen was perforce laughing in response. He had never been able to resist Pixie's laugh. Tea was brought in, and the young hostess did the honours with a pretty hospitality. It was the first meal of which they had partaken *à deux*, and its homely intimacy brought back the wistful look into Stephen's eyes. Perhaps Pixie noticed it, perhaps a point had been reached when she felt it impossible to go on talking generalities; in any case, she laid down her cup, straightened herself in her chair with an air of preparing for something big and momentous, and announced clearly—

"I had a letter this morning from Honor Vaughan."

Stephen Glynn started, and his face hardened. The subject was evidently unwelcome to the point of pain.

"She writes to *you*?"

"I write to her! Of course she answers. I was always fond of Honor."

"Possibly. Before her marriage. As Stanor's wife, however—"

Pixie bent forward, looking him full in the face.

"I have no quarrel with Stanor's wife. I was angry with *him*. There was something in me which he hurt very much.—I think,"

she slightly shrugged her shoulder, and a flicker of a smile passed over her face, and was gone, "'twas my pride! It hurt to think he had been *forced* to come back. If he'd trusted me and told the truth it would have saved suffering for us—all! At the time I felt I could never forgive him, but that passed. I don't say I can ever think of him as I did before, as quite honest and true, but—" The smile flashed back. "Can *you* go on being angry, yourself?"

"I—don't think," said Stephen slowly, "that 'angry' is the right word. I'm disappointed—disappointed with a bitterness which has its root in ten long years of hope and effort. Practically I have lived my life through that boy. My great object and desire was to secure for him all that I had missed. I had made no definite promises, it seemed wiser not, but in effect he was my heir, and all I have would have gone to him. Now that's over! The future has been taken from me, as well as the past. America has absorbed him. He has already, through his wife, more money than he can use, and the rôle of an English country gentleman has lost its attractions for him. There was a time in my first outburst of indignation when I should have felt it a relief to have had some power of retaliation, but, as you say, that passed. ... He was the only person whom I could in any sense claim as my own, and—I've lost him! He is independent of me now. I can do no more for him." The dark eyes were full of pain. "That is, after all, the thing that hurts the most. The lad has faults, but I loved him. I lived through him; now I can do no more, and our lives fall apart. There's a big blank!"

Pixie did not answer. Her face was very pale; in her ears was a loud thudding noise, which seemed mysteriously to be inside her own breast.

"As for his wife, she may be a good girl—she appears to have behaved in an honourable fashion—but to me it's a new type, and I can't pretend that I'm not prejudiced. There is only one thing that is satisfactory. The boy is honestly in love, even to the extent of abandoning his career to assist in the management of a pickle factory."

There was an inflection in the tone in which these last words were pronounced which brought Pixie's eyes upon him in reproach.

"They are very *good* pickles! I can't see that making them is any less dignified than 'bulling' and 'bearing' cotton—whatever that may mean!—Stanor used to write of it in his letters. Honor's father loved his workmen, and made her promise to go

on looking after them as he had done. She doesn't need any more money; it would be easier for her to retire and hand over the factory to some one else. It's for the men's sake that she keeps it on, and to keep her promise to her father. Mr Glynn, you *must* love Honor. She's good, and true, and honourable, and she's—Stanor's wife!"

"How could he? How could he?" Stephen rose impetuously, and began pacing up and down, a rare excitement growing in voice and manner. "When he could have had *You!* ... Good? Yes! She may be good—I'm not denying the girl's good points. She has behaved well. She has her attractions—Stanor evidently thinks her beautiful—but—*he might have had You!* ... He has chosen this girl with her ordinary attractions, instead of *your* sweetness, *your* sunshine, *your* generosity, *your* kindness! Your voice, Pixie; your eyes ... Your *love!* He was so blind ... so deaf. ... The substance was his, and for a shadow—a poor, faint shadow—"

Pixie had risen in her turn. Red as a rose she stood before him, with shrinking eyes, but hands held out in sweet, courageous invitation.

"If ye think so much of me as all that," said the deep voice breathlessly, "*wouldn't ye like me for yourself?*"

Ten minutes later the miracle, the wonder, was as marvellous as ever: as incredible to the man whose life was suddenly irradiated with sunshine.

"Pixie! Pixie!" he cried. "My youth! ... Will you give it back to me, sweetheart—the youth that I lost?"

"Beloved!" said Pixie, and her voice was as the swell of a deep organ note. "It was not lost. It's been waiting for you—" she touched her heart with an eloquent gesture—"here!"

The End.
